JULY

An ACE Magazine

Western Trails

10¢

DEATH CRACKS THE OVERLAND WHIP

by L.P.HOLMES

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LARRY SCORED A DOUBLE SCOOP WHEN . . .

TELEVISION STATION WFFX IS GIVING ON-THE-SPOT COVERAGE OF A LARGE PIER FIRE THROUGH THE LATEST TYPE PORTABLE TELEVISION CAMERA . . .

AND NOW, LARRY RICHMOND, ACE REPORTER OF "THE PLANET", WHO'S BEEN COVERING THIS FIRE SINCE LAST NIGHT, WILL TELL US HOW IT STARTED . . .

THAT'S MY BROTHER'S MISSING BOY! I'D KNOW HIM ANYWHERE!

GREAT SCOTT! AFTER A FIVE-YEAR SEARCH, GWEN, GET "THE PLANET" ON THE PHONE!

. . . AND AS THE REPORTER'S IMAGE APPEARS ON A DISTANT TELEVISION SCREEN, AN ELDERLY HOUSE-GUEST OF JUDGE McGEE STARES IN WONDER

YES, MR. RICHMOND IS FROM CALIFORNIA . . . ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO . . . I'LL CALL HIM RIGHT IN

HE CAN COVER HIS OWN STORY!

I KNOW YOU'RE TIRED, BUT THIS STORY WILL GIVE YOU THE THRILL OF YOUR LIFE

WHEW! THAT'S "PLATINUM ROW"! I'D BETTER CLEAN UP FIRST

THANKS FOR THE RAZOR, JOE. THIS BLADE'S A HONEY!

THIN GILLETTES ARE ALWAYS LIKE THAT . . . PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

. . . AND TODAY, AT LONG LAST, WE FOUND THE MISSING HEIR. HIS NAME . . . LARRY RICHMOND!

GREAT STORY . . . WHY, THAT'S ME!

EXTRA! PLANET REPORTER MISSING HEIR!

THIS ALL SEEMS LIKE A WONDERFUL DREAM, MISS MORRIS

GWEN TO YOU . . . AFTER ALL, WE'RE FOSTER-COUSINS

HE'S SO HANDSOME

EXTRA! THIN GILLETTE SHAVE SCORES AGAIN!

THIN GILLETTES ALWAYS GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK IN THE PINK AND FEEL THAT WAY, TOO. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" . . . PROTECT YOU FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

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Vol. XLII No. 4

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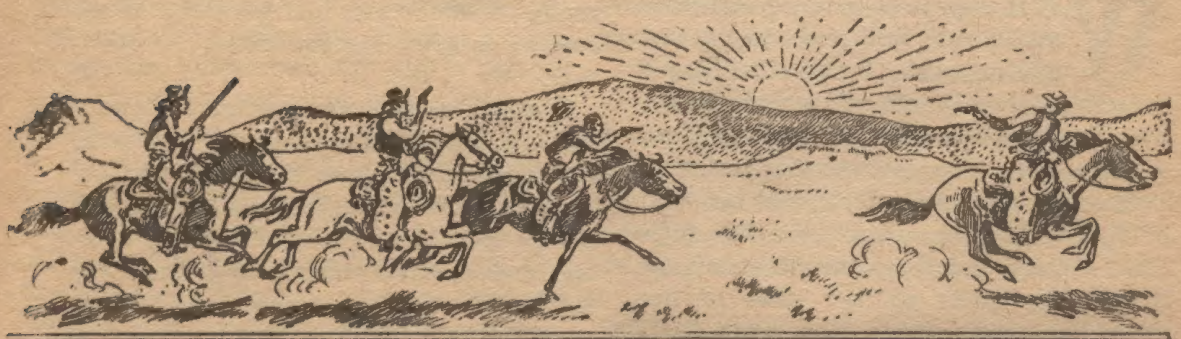

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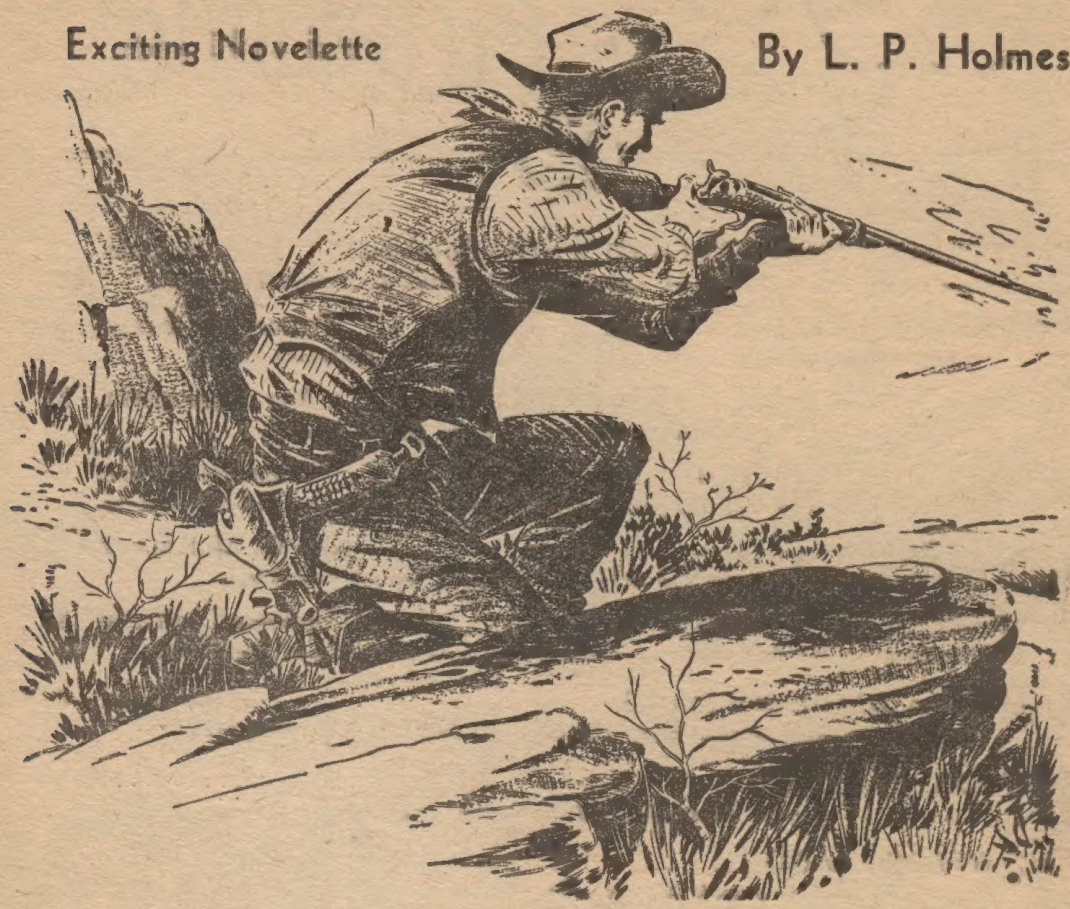
Death Cracks the

Exciting Novelette

By L. P. Holmes



CHAPTER I

WITH her sand-scoured cutwater stubbornly splitting the never-ending push of the silt-charged current of the Colorado River, the stern-wheeler *Maricopa* nosed up to the landing at Ehrenberg. The sun was straight overhead and under the savage, blasting heat of it the tar was oozing from the little river steamer's deck seams. Heat mirage flowed like water up the sides of her scorching single stack. The river itself was a sliding sheet of dull, sullen red copper.

Standing beside his saddled horse on the *Maricopa's* forward cargo deck, Steve Leland waited for the mooring hawsers to be secured and the Cocopah Indian deck hands to run out the gangplank. Waiting so, Leland let his glance run over the group of idlers who had gathered at the landing to greet the arrival of the *Maricopa.*

Three men stood apart from the others, and the moment the gangplank clattered into place they came down its sloping, cleated planks to the *Maricopa's* deck. The two in front were sullen and angry looking and carried meager luggage. The third of the group, moving along behind, was thickset, with a swarthy, broad-boned face and hard, truculent black eyes. He looked around and his voice lifted, as hard and truculent as his glance.

"Couple of upriver passengers for you, Dix. Don't let 'em off within fifty miles of Ehrenberg."

Overland Whip

Steve Leland had his gunwork cut out for him when he bought that stage line. For holdup hombres had already salivated his three predecessors. And Steve now found himself the shotgun guard of a stage bound for boot hill.

Jimmy Dix, skipper of the *Maricopa*, came swinging down the starboard ladder from the upper deck. He was a wiry little man, with white hair and a pair of eyes so sharp and blue they seemed to fairly crackle.

He said crisply, "See here, Peynall, I told you last trip I was all through hauling your undesirables out of town. I run this boat as a business proposition, not as free transportation for every bum and drifter that Ehrenberg gets tired of having around. Get these two off my deck and keep them off!"

"We're not bums and we're not drifters," spoke up the elder of the two men in question. "We'd have plenty of money to buy passage if Jake Sloniker would pay us what he owes you. But he won't do that. Instead he turns Peynall loose to run us out of town."

Peynall turned on the speaker, a glint of ferocity in his black eyes. "You'll be smart to keep your mouth shut, Carter, else you'll receipt for that gun-whipping I told you about. They can work their passage, Dix, stoking your boilers. Nice weather to stoke boilers."

PHYSICAL resemblance was strong between the two men being given floaters. Steve Leland catalogued them as father and son. Not a bad-looking pair, he thought, just discouraged and plainly fearful of the hulking Peynall.

"They don't look like bums to me, now

that I take a good look," said Captain Jimmy Dix crisply. "I shouldn't wonder they are telling the truth about Jake Sloniker. He's pulled that same trick before."

"I don't know anything about that," growled Peynall. "And I don't care. All I know is that they ain't wanted in Ehrenberg. So, they're moving on. They either go on your boat, Dix, or they stay here for good."

There was a cold-blooded emphasis in Peynall's final words that was unmistakable.

Captain Dix looked at Peynall with open dislike. "I'm waiting with hope for the day when you and Jake Sloniker get what you've handed out to so many others." He turned to the two men and his voice and manner went kindly. "I'll find something for you to do to earn your passage. And it won't be stoking boilers. Take it easy. I won't be pushing off until the middle of the afternoon."

Steve Leland's horse was stirring restlessly, anxious to get solid earth under its hoofs once more. Steve led the animal to the gangplank, which was still blocked by Peynall.

"One side!" said Steve crisply. "You there—make way!"

The curtness of Steve Leland's voice and manner plainly rasped Peynall, so he did not move. His black eyes ran up and down Steve in measuring survey. "Not so fast!" he growled. "First thing you know, Mister, you'll be staying on this boat and traveling a lot further upstream before you get off."

"Don't believe it," said Steve curtly. "Would you be trying to tell me that you've a claim on all this part of Arizona Territory?"

"I say who comes into Ehrenberg and who don't," blurted Peynall. "I've just decided that you don't."

"That," murmured Steve softly, "is what you think."

Steve had been maneuvering his horse while he spoke. Now he lifted a hand and slapped the animal sharply on the shoulder.

"Git, Splinter!" he snapped.

Splinter did not hesitate, but went up the gangplank with a rush, hoofs clattering on the cleats. Peynall, cursing and grabbing for a gun, tried to dodge. There wasn't room enough. The horse's shoulder caught Peynall solidly, smashing him back and over the rail of the gangplank and Peynall went down into the muddy river waters between the boat and bank. Splinter clattered right on through until he had that solid earth he craved, under his stamping hoofs. Then, snorting his satisfaction, he turned to await his master.

Steve Leland stood on the gangplank, watching Peynall flounder and thrash about and finally claw his way free of the river and up the muddy bank. For the moment at least, Peynall had lost both his gun and his swaggering truculence. Mud-smeared and dripping, he slouched away up the short lift of road to town, never once looking back. Steve Leland watched him go, cool sardonic laughter in his eyes.

A hand tugged at Steve's sleeve. It was Captain Jimmy Dix, who said, "He doesn't look it right this minute. But yonder goes a dangerous man. Make no mistake about that, friend. You'll notice that none of these river landing loafers laughed over that, which they would have done uproariously had it happened to anyone else but Mort Peynall. If you're intending to stay in Ehrenberg any length of time, you'll be smart to keep a sharp watch, night and day. For you've made yourself a deadly enemy."

Steve met Captain Jimmy's eyes, recognized the sober truth in them. He nodded. "Thanks, captain. I'll watch him."

IN THE saddle or afoot, Steve Leland was a lean, competent figure, sweated down to sinewy rawhide by the unrelenting desert sun. That same sun had burned his face and throat and hands to a deep mahogany brown. His features were bold, yet reserved, his mouth touched with grimness. His eyes were clear and very steady and under his wide-brimmed, flat-crowned Stetson his hair was tawny. A Sharps rifle hung in his saddle scabbard and the gunbelt about his lean flanks sagged with the weight of a heavy Colt.

Steve set his horse to a jog along the

short lift of road up to town, then on through to where the stage and freight corrals stood at the eastern outskirts.

Here in the hot, blue shade of the overhang of a long, low building were grouped some two dozen men, listening to the droning voice of an auctioneer who was going through his opening spiel before getting down the actual business at hand.

Steve Leland rode up, dismounted, and moved in on the group. Slightly apart from the others stood a grizzle-haired man, no longer young, but with level, steady eyes, a blunt obstinate jaw and a face burned as black and hard as a piece of lava by the desert sun. Steve touched the man on the arm and asked, his voice low and quiet:

"Where might I find Joe Bannon, friend?"

Startled, the man looked at Steve. "You must be a stranger or you'd have heard. Joe Bannon is dead. That's why they're set to auction off what's left of his stage company. Though I don't know why they should go to all this trouble, when it is already a cut and dried proposition. Only two of us here really interested in owning the layout. I, Jeff Joslyn, am one of them. And I'm not fooling myself as to how far my lone little thousand dollars will get me against what Jake Sloniker can bid. Just the same, Sloniker won't get it at too much of a steal. He'll have to go above a thousand."

"How much is there to this stage company?" queried Steve.

The auctioneer answered him. "Final listing, gentlemen. Two Concord thoroughbrace stagecoaches, in first-class used condition. One mud wagon, the same. Twenty head of sound, well-broken horses. Two dozen sets of harness. Approximately thirty ton of Big Bend Meadows wild hay. Five ton of sacked oats. Let's hear a bid, gentlemen!"

A curt hard voice said, "Five hundred dollars."

A stir ran through the little crowd, and a mutter of protest. A man asked, "Why don't you try and get it for nothing, Sloniker?"

That hard voice, with a note of rising harshness rapped out, "Nothing to top you from upping the bid, Haslam. Put up or shut up!"

Jeff Joslyn, the leathery-faced man beside Steve Leland, called, "Five fifty!"

The owner of that hard voice, Jake Sloniker, turned and looked at Joslyn. Sloniker was a big, raw-boned man with pale eyes and a crooked jaw. He said, "This is cash on the barrel head, Joslyn. You sure you got it?"

"I know the rules as well as you, Sloniker," retorted Jeff Joslyn. "You heard my bid. Five fifty."

"Six hundred," snapper Sloniker.

"Six fifty," came back Joslyn sturdily.

Steve Leland saw the anger pinching Sloniker's lips as he upped the bid to eight hundred.

"Eight fifty," called Joslyn.

"One thousand!" barked Sloniker.

Jeff Joslyn shrugged and said to Steve Leland, "That's as far as I can ride. But anyhow, I made him double his original bid, which means just twice as much money to go to Joe Bannon's widowed sister in Yuma."

Steve drawled, "Stick around, friend. This jig isn't over yet." Steve raised his voice. "One thousand and one!"

CHAPTER II

A NEW ripple of interest ran through the crowd, and heads swung Steve's way. Sloniker's pale eyes bored at Steve, who met the look with cool challenge.

"Eleven hundred!"

"Eleven hundred and one," said Steve.

Sloniker pushed over and faced Steve. "This ain't a game, Mister," he snarled. "This is business."

"Right!" drawled Steve. "All the way. Eleven hundred and one is the bid."

The crowd was plainly enjoying this. Sloniker turned angrily back to the auctioneer. "Thirteen hundred."

"And one," droned Steve.

Jeff Joslyn plucked anxiously at Steve's sleeve. "It is like Sloniker said, friend. Cash on the barrel head."

Steve nodded. "A fact that is beginning to worry Mister Sloniker, I think. I got that much cash and a little more."

"Then, by jingo, when you reach the

end of your poke, you got my thousand to work with," declared Joslyn. "Stay with him!"

"You mean that?"

"Every damned word!"

"Keno!" said Steve. "Here we begin using the spurs." He looked over at the auctioneer and called, "You heard my bid. Thirteen hundred and one dollars. Is anybody topping it?"

"Fifteen hundred," grated Sloniker.

"Eighteen hundred!" Steve jumped the ante abruptly.

"Stay with him, stranger!" called Haslam, a reckless-eyed redhead. "If the damned skinflint wants it, make him pay for it."

Steve saw Sloniker run the tip of his tongue across his lips. "Two thousand!" Sloniker croaked.

"Twenty-one hundred!" snapped Steve.

Sloniker went over to the auctioneer and said something to him in a low voice. The auctioneer squirmed uneasily. Jeff Joslyn yelled, "No finagling. Cash on the barrel head, remember!"

"Damned right!" whooped Haslam, the redhead. "Cash it is."

The auctioneer was sweating. "I reckon that is how it will have to be, Jake. The bid is twenty-one hundred. You topping that?"

Sloniker cursed, turned away, pushed off through the crowd. The auctioneer looked around. "Twenty-one hundred is the bid. Do I hear twenty-two? Going—going—gone! Sold to the stranger yonder. Cash it is, Mister. You got it?"

Steve moved over, pulled a heavy money belt from inside his shirt, began counting out little stacks of gold coin. When Steve's count reached eleven hundred, Jeff Joslyn dropped a worn, heavy, fat buckskin sack beside it.

"My thousand," he said. "Count it, Crowe."

Steve started to protest, but Joslyn stuck out his stubborn chin. "I never ask to ride on the other feller's money. I said I'd lay a thousand on the line. There it is."

"Are you fellers partners?" demanded Crowe, the auctioneer.

Steve looked at Joslyn and smiled grimly. "Seems so."

"Well," said Crowe, "you've bought yourselves a stage line at a bargain. And," he added, his voice lowering, "Jake Sloniker will hate your guts from now on."

Jeff Joslyn stuck his hand out to Steve and said, "I didn't get the name."

"Leland. Steve Leland."

JOSLYN'S eyes widened. "There was a Danny Leland who rode shotgun guard for Joe Bannon. And along with Bill Daggett, who was the whip on that particular trip, Danny Leland was shot dead in the holdup at Thirsty Pass, coming in across the Copper Mountains."

Steve's face turned somber. "Danny was my younger brother. That's why I'm here. I'll be wanting to know more about that holdup."

The interest in the auction done with, the crowd was breaking up. The redhead, Haslam, came over to Steve and Joslyn. "You'll be needing men, Jeff," he said. "How's for my old job?"

Joslyn nodded, smiling grimly. "Sure, Red. And shake hands with Steve Leland, older brother of Danny Leland."

"Ah!" said Red Haslam, his handshake hard and vigorous. "This means something. Danny was a mighty good friend of mine. Write out any chore you want, Steve, and I'll have one damned good whirl at putting it over."

"It's a deal, Red," said Steve.

Steve left his horse with Red Haslam to be put up in one of the corrals, then swung across town with Jeff Joslyn. "You'll be eating dinner with me at my cabin, Steve," said Joslyn. "My girl, Kansas, is the best cook along the river."

The Joslyn cabin overlooked the river and had a few bright, hardy flowers about the step. Voices sounded inside as Joslyn and Steve came up to the door, where Joslyn called:

"Company for dinner, Kansas."

There was a rustle of movement and a girl came out to meet them. She was slender and pretty in a red and white checked gingham dress. She had rich dark hair and dark eyes full of fiery spirit. Her

mouth was red and willful, but sweetened by a slight upturn at the corners.

"Company welcome," she said lightly. "There is always enough for one more. Captain Jimmy is eating with us, too, Dad."

Joslyn grinned. "That durned old river rat! Kansas, meet Steve Leland, my partner."

"Your partner! Dad, don't tell me you've bought in on that stage line? And after you promised—"

Jeff Joslyn squirmed a little. "I never promised a thing, and you know it, Kansas. All I said was that I wouldn't have a chance against Jake Sloniker with only a thousand in my poke. And I wouldn't have had, either, if Steve here hadn't happened along. So we pooled our cash and outbid Sloniker. We got it for twenty-one hundred and we sure got a bargain."

Kansas Joslyn flared angrily. "If you'd got it for only twenty-one cents, it would still have been a bargain for fools, and fools only," she cried. "All that stage line has ever done is kill about every man who ever had anything to do with it. It even got Joe Bannon in the end. Before him it was Bill Daggett and Danny Leland and—" She broke off, staring at Steve.

Steve nodded. "That's right, Miss. Danny was my brother. Which is the reason I'm here in Ehrenberg and why I decided to buy in on the stage line. I want to see if the ones who got Danny would like to try their luck at getting another Leland." Steve's face was a hard, saturnine mask as he finished.

THE Carters, father and son, lounged glumly in the breathlessly hot shade of the *Maricopa's* upper deck and stared a little wonderingly at Steve Leland as he came aboard and over to them. They had seen this lean, desert-blackened rider thoroughly discomfit Mort Peynall, so they eyed him now with respect.

Steve nodded briefly. "Howdy! From what I saw and heard right after the *Maricopa* berthed, I take it that you two were not leaving Ehrenberg of your own free will. That right?"

The elder Carter nodded. "That's right. But it looks like we got no choice, what with that plug-ugly Mort Peynall after us. Tug and me, we make no pretense at being gunfighters. We don't want trouble with any man. All we want is a chance to work and earn a living."

"There's another job waiting for both of you here in Ehrenberg, if you want to take it," said Steve. "And you'll be paid for this one."

"What kind of a job?"

"Tending stage gear, caring for horses, things of that sort."

Ben Carter, the elder, hesitated. "Sounds good," he admitted. "Tug and me savvy broncos pretty good. But there's still Sloniker and Peynall to think about."

Tug, the younger Carter, stirred restlessly. "This runnin' away from guys like Sloniker and Peynall don't set good with me at all," he growled. "Like Pap says, I ain't a gunfighter, but I'd sure like to try my luck on Mort Peynall in a strict rough and tumble." He flexed a pair of big, work-toughened hands.

"I'll keep Sloniker and Peynall off your necks," Steve Leland promised. "You'll be working for Jeff Joslyn and me. How about it?"

Tug Carter said, "I'm for it if Pap is."

Ben Carter, older, more cautious, still hesitated. Steve said, "You can run away from a man. But from then on you can never run away from the knowledge that you ran away. A man's self-respect is worth a lot."

Ben Carter straightened his gaunt shoulders. "I reckon that's the answer. Tug and me are with you."

With the Carters beside him, Steve deliberately led the way right through the center of town. He hadn't seen Mort Peynall since the incident at the *Maricopa*, but he wanted Peynall to know that he'd brought the Carters back and he figured this was the best way to do it. At the corrals he turned the Carters over to Jeff Joslyn then went across to the harness shed where Red Haslam was soaping down a set.

"Ever driven stage, Red?" Steve asked.

Red grinned. "No, but I'd like to. I've driven about everything else."

"You know what driving a stage between here and Gold Hill can very well mean. It's turned out to be a bloody road."

The recklessness in Red Haslam's eyes took on a hard shine. "I worked for Joe Bannon. He was a good man. Bill Daggett was a good man and Danny Leland, your brother, was my good friend. For that reason I can't think of a thing I'd rather do than drive the Ehrenberg-Gold Hill run, with a Sharps rifle under my leg and a real tough shotgun guard along side of me on the box."

"Good enough! From now on you're a stage whip. The Carters will do all the roustabout work."

A little later, Steve got Tug Carter alone. "How much do you figure you and your father have coming from Sloniker, Tug?"

"He promised us forty dollars to do the job," said Tug. "Why?"

"Any time I argue, I like to have my facts," said Steve dryly.

The afternoon had run out by the time Steve Leland and Jeff Joslyn had their plans all set. "I'll take the first stage out tomorrow morning at seven," said Joslyn. "The same time Joe Bannon used to start the run."

Steve shook his head. "You won't be taking it out, Jeff. Red Haslam is going to be the whip and I'm riding shotgun guard with him."

"The devil you say!" snorted Joslyn. "I'm a partner in this deal. I'll carry my share of the load."

"Which you'll do best by taking care of all the business angles. But you're not going out as whip until the road has been made safe."

"That's a lot of damn foolishness," Joslyn argued. "I can take care of myself. I'm—"

"You're your daughter's father," cut in Steve. "I can see that her main protest against you buying in on the line is worry over you after what happened to Joe Bannon, Danny, and Bill Daggett. So that is the way it will be, Jeff."

"You coming over for supper?" asked the disgruntled Joslyn.

Steve shook his head. "That'd be too much of a good thing, Jeff. I may be over later, though."

WITH the reluctant sun gone, a smoky, purple dusk brought a suggestion of relief from the heat. The river flowed darkly somber. The *Maricopa* had long since gone on her way upstream.

Steve ate supper in a stuffy little hashhouse, then started prowling the town, looking in at this saloon and that. In a large one near the center of town he found Jake Sloniker and Mort Peynall sitting in a poker game. Steve sauntered over and stood behind Sloniker.

Peynall, across the table, looked up, stared, his eyes filming. He shot a low word of warning across the table to Sloniker, who twisted in his chair and scowled up at Steve.

"Something you wanted?" he rasped. "If not, step aside. I don't like anybody breathing down my neck."

Sloniker had been winning. There was quite a stack of gold and silver coins in front of him. Steve reached over and with the forefinger of his left hand, pushed two golden double eagles out of the pile.

"Collection night, Sloniker. Wages you owe to Ben and Tug Carter. They're working for me now. And I always look after my men. Well?"

Stillness fell over the room. Men looked at Steve, at Sloniker and Peynall. Their attitude showed plainly that they had no sympathy for either of the latter.

"This is a barefaced holdup!" snarled Sloniker. "Get after him, some of you men. Can't you see this is a holdup?"

Nobody moved. A man said, "Your cat, Sloniker. Skin it if you can."

"I don't owe them damned Carters a red cent," blustered Sloniker. "They're lying."

"No," drawled Steve. "But you are. It's a trick you've pulled before, I understand. You work men and when they ask for their wages, you have Peynall run them out of town."

"Right!" said a voice in the crowd.

"More than one in these parts has found that out."

Seeing how the temper of the crowd ran, Sloniker made no more protest when Steve picked up the money and pocketed it. Mort Peynall just stared and stared at Steve, who grinned mockingly.

"You won't have any trouble remembering me, Peynall. I'll be around."

Steve walked out and went over to the Joslyn cabin. Two people were sitting on the doorstep in the warm starlight. One of them was Kansas Joslyn. The other . . .

"Jeff?" asked Steve.

"Dad isn't here just now," answered the girl. "He went off a little ago on some errand. He should be back shortly. Shake hands with Doctor John Munger, Mr. Leland. John, this is Dad's partner in that fool stage-line deal, Steve Leland."

As near as Steve could tell in the starlight, Doctor John Munger was a man of about thirty, slender, catlike. He said, pleasantly enough. "Glad to known you, Leland. Kansas and I were just talking over this business deal you and Jeff are in together. In my opinion you and Jeff got a bargain. Kansas doesn't wholly agree." Munger laughed lightly. Steve could feel a surprising coiling power in Doc Munger's handshake.

"I'm afraid," murmured Steve, "that Miss Joslyn blames me for it all. Maybe she's right. But I had no idea at the time, of course, that I was bringing worry to a lady."

"Maybe," said Kansas slowly, "I've been a little unjust, there. Just the same, I'm still against Dad having anything to do with that stage line, but there doesn't seem to be much I can do about it now. Anyway, thanks for not letting him take the stage out tomorrow morning. I'm not exactly a cry-baby, but he is all I've got, and I don't want him taking any unnecessary chances."

"Jeff will be safe enough so long as he does no driving," said Steve.

"I'm not so sure," the girl said soberly. "Joe Bannon wasn't killed while driving or while riding shotgun guard, either. He was killed right here in Ehrenberg, shot in the back by someone skulking in the dark. I've long had the feeling that the holdups between here and Gold Hill were not pulled merely for the gold bullion that was taken. The stage line could be a big money-maker. It is my idea that someone pulled those holdups in an attempt to drive Joe Bannon out of business. He wouldn't drive, so they killed him."

"They?" questioned Steve.

"Your guess is as good as mine," said the girl.

Somewhere back in town a gunshot sounded. It broke the murmuring stillness of the desert night with ominous echo. Kansas Joslyn came to her feet, taut and still and plainly fearful.

Doc Munger said, "Maybe nothing—maybe much. I better be going up there, in case I'm needed."

The girl caught him by the arm. "Wait, John—wait!"

CHAPTER III

THERE were some distant muffled shouts. Then, presently, the sound of hurrying steps. Kansas Joslyn pressed both hands against her throat. Red Haslam came up through the dark.

"Hello, the cabin! Steve Leland around?"

"Right here, Red. What is it?"

"Somebody took a shot at Jeff Joslyn, and—"

A wail broke from the girl. "I knew it—I knew it! Dad—Dad!"

"How bad, Red?" snapped Steve.

"Not too bad. Shot a leg out from under him. We got him resting easy as possible over at the corrals."

Kansas Joslyn whirled furiously on Steve. "You see?" she stormed. "I was right the first time. It is your fault for getting Dad mixed up in all this. John—quickly, John!"

She ran off into the night and Doctor John Munger hurried after her. . . .

Jeff Joslyn was laid out on a pile of empty grain sacks in the harness shed. Doc Munger had stopped by his office for his kit, and now, by the light of several lanterns, he worked deftly. A handsome man, Doc Munger, his steely hands fast and sure. Kansas Joslyn crouched beside

him, her face pale and strained, while she held her father's hand and petted it fondly. Now and then she sobbed a little, unable to hold it back.

"There, child—there!" mumbled Jeff Joslyn, his face drawn and clammy with pain sweat. "It isn't very bad." He looked past the girl's dark head at Steve and grinned twistedly. "Fine one I am, Steve. Letting you down like this, just when we're all set to start business."

"You didn't let him down!" cried Kansas Joslyn. "He let you down by ever showing here in Ehrenberg. I wish we'd never laid eyes on him!"

"Hush, girl!" growled old Jeff. "That's foolish talk and you know it."

"Just one question, Jeff," said Steve quietly. "Who did it?"

"No idea at all. I'd been here at the corrals, talking things over with the boys. I started home. I saw the gun flash over by the end of the warehouse and my leg went out from under me."

"How far were you from where the shot was fired?"

"Mebbe fifteen yards, mebbe twenty. Not too good shooting, if that's what you mean. They should have got me center, at that distance."

Doc Munger had finished. "Get a blanket for a stretcher and take Jeff home," he ordered briskly.

Fifteen minutes later Jeff Joslyn was resting in his own cabin on his own bunk. "The stage goes out tomorrow morning, Steve?" he asked.

Steve nodded. "The stage goes out. Red and I'll take care of that."

It did go out, in the steel gray desert dawn, with Red Haslam handling the reins and Steve Leland riding the box beside him as shotgun guard. They had a capacity load of miners bound for Gold Hill. They rolled out the long, bitter sweep of desert between Ehrenberg and the Copper Mountains. They crossed the Coppers by way of Thirsty Pass and they climbed the broken country beyond to the mines at Gold Hill. There, after discharging their passengers, Steve had a long talk with Frank Roscoe, superintendent of the Gold Hill mines.

ROSCOE was a tall, thin, worried-looking man who nervously paced the small width of his office. "Sure we got bullion to go out to Ehrenberg," he said. "And I wish to hell t was all there. Entirely too much of it is piling up here for my peace of mind. What we call our strongbox here at the mines, a man could tear to shreds with a pick in less than a minute. And there are mighty, mighty few men here at these mines I'd trust very far.

"This is a wild, far frontier. Men drift in, work a while, drift out again. You ask for their names to sign them up on the time sheets and the payroll. You can tell by the manner of lots of them that the name they give you is not their real one."

Roscoe took another turn up and down the office. "I've thought of loading up a wagon and taking it out myself, under armed guard," he went on. "Then I get to thinking—what armed guard? What men have I that I could trust as armed guards over a wagonload of thirty or forty thousand dollars' worth of gold bullion? They'd be liable to turn on me with the very guns I armed them with. I'd like nothing better than to see that bullion safely in our offices at Ehrenberg. But the question is, Leland, how do I know you can get it there safely? Joe Bannon couldn't, though the poor devil tried hard enough."

"I'm ready to lay my life on the line to say I can get it out safely for you, Mr. Roscoe," said Steve. "It is hauling bullion that can make the stage line a real paying business. It is business Jeff Joslyn and I want, what we got to have. I'll go a long way to make good on the deal. It might help," he added, looking Roscoe levelly in the eye, "when I tell you that Danny Leland, the shotgun guard killed in the Thirsty Pass holdup, was my younger brother. I expect to even up for Danny."

"Then," said Roscoe soberly, "you won't whip easy, will you? All right, I'm going to try one more gamble, Leland. I'll send ten thousand in bullion out with you this trip. If that goes safely through, there'll be more, much more."

Shortly after sundown that evening, Steve delivered the bullion to the mine offices in Ehrenberg. He and Red Haslam had brought it through, without a sign of trouble anywhere.

After supper, Steve went over to the Joslyn cabin to report. He found Doc Munger there with Jeff and Kansas. "How's the leg, Jeff?" asked Steve.

"Hurts like billy-heli," grunted Jeff. "But Doc says I got to expect that for a while. How were things along the road?"

"Peaceful. Red and I brought back ten thousand in bullion."

"No! How'd you sell Roscoe on the idea?"

Steve shrugged. "We had a talk. He said if we got this chunk through safe, there'd be more tomorrow."

"That's great!" enthused Jeff, forgetting all about his leg. "I figgered it might take us a month or more to convince Roscoe we could do the job for him. Yeah, that's great. But don't you go to getting careless, boy. You better let Kansas knock some supper together for you."

The girl stirred restlessly, and Steve, flashing a glance at her, said quickly, "Thanks. But I've already eaten."

Doc Munger drew Steve aside. "I'm glad you brought Jeff good news about getting the bullion business so quickly. He's been stewing all day. He'll rest easier now. Well, I got to be getting along. I've got a Mexican down with fever and I've got to dose him with quinine."

KANSAS went to the door with Munger and Steve heard her say, "I thought you were going to spend the evening, John."

"So did I," answered Munger. "But that Mexican is on my mind. He's a pretty sick man. See you tomorrow, Kansas."

Jeff Joslyn said to Steve, "Let's not advertise about the bullion, Steve. What nobody knows won't hurt 'em."

"That's right. No one knows about it but we folks and the men at the mine offices. Red and I delivered the bullion to the back door of the mine offices and after dark. Well, like Doc Munger, I got things to do, Jeff. See you tomorrow night. Take care of yourself."

To Steve's surprise, Kansas Joslyn went to the door with him, too. She said quietly, "You do the same. Take care of yourself, I mean."

"A habit of mine," murmured Steve dryly. "I must say I'm surprised at your good thought, and I appreciate it."

The glow of the lamplight touched her face as she stood there in the doorway, and Steve saw color flush across her cheeks. "Very well, I was hateful. I admit it. But the success of this stage venture is all important to Dad and your continued welfare is vital to that success."

"That," drawled Steve, "makes me feel like a strong horse, needed for heavy pulling. Well, I'll do my best. Good night!"

In the outer dark, Steve paused to roll and light a smoke. Out below him the river flowed, reflecting the star glow murkily. The breath of it came up to him, heavy and dank. Steve broke the sulphur match he had used with a quick twist of his fingers.

That girl, Kansas Joslyn! Why did he let her get under his skin? Why should her opinion, her attitude toward him, one way or the other, matter a thin damn? No reason at all, that he could see. Yet—it did.

Back at the corrals, Steve joined Red Haslam and the two Carters in the harness shed. "Ever been out to Gold Hill, Tug?" Steve asked.

Tug Carter nodded. "Once. Skinned a wagonload of supplies out for Jake Sloniker. Which was part of the job he wasn't going to pay Pap and me for. Why do you ask, Steve?"

"You recall that crooked, sandy wash that the road crosses, about halfway between Gold Hill and the Coppers? You remember that on the north side of the road the mesquite grows pretty heavy. Well, right after midnight you take my Splinter horse and ride out there. You lay low in that mesquite until Red and me come by on the return trip. It is slow going through that sandy wash.

"I'm going to drop off the back of the stage and you're coming on by the same way to take my place as shotgun guard. We're about the same size and heft and

from a distance nobody will know the difference. And when you and Red are rolling back across Thirsty Pass, me and my Splinter horse ain't going to be too far away. We'll be keeping watch from the north shoulder of the pass."

Red Haslam's eyes took on an eager glint. "You figure that tomorrow they might take a whirl at us, Steve?"

"I figure to be ready for them if they do, Red. Because we'll really be carrying bullion. Tug, you better turn in and get some sleep before you leave."

Steve went back downtown. He was too restless to take the same advice he'd given Tug Carter. Whether he liked it or not, Steve had to admit to himself the building up of tension within him. Whoever it was that had put Joe Bannon definitely out of the stage game and who had taken that shot at Jeff Joslyn were not through by any means. It was not reasonable to feel that they were. They would strike again and a man could not help being edgy, wondering when and how.

It was smart to make all plans possible to take care of any eventuality, as he had just done with Tug Carter. It was also smart to be seen about town, where there was always a chance of picking up a lead, or some item of information that would help guard the future.

CHAPTER IV

A DRUNK came lurching from a saloon door, up ahead. He stood in the light flare, teetering back and forth as though unable to make up his befuddled mind where he wanted to go. He turned and came toward Steve more or less taking in the whole of the splintery board sidewalk. He yawed to port, veered to starboard. He began to sing.

He came even with Steve, swinging toward the outer edge of the sidewalk. It seemed he was safely past, on his uncertain way. But with a drunken man's unpredictability, he lurched back, bumping heavily into Steve, throwing him to one side.

Then came a peculiar, fluttering, faint hiss, a fleshy thud. The drunk's roistering song broke off with choked abruptness. He put both hands to his throat and fell forward on his face. He gave a spasmodic kick that turned him over on his back. All breath went of him in a bubbling sigh and he was very still. A glint of lamplight from a neighboring window faintly touched the prone figure. Buried to the hilt in the luckless drunk's throat was a bowie knife!

It had happened with sudden, deadly speed. One moment a man in his cups, going his harmless, aimless way. The next moment that man was down, a knife in his throat. A knife that had been meant, beyond any doubt, for Steve Leland.

His shoulders flat against the wall of the building beside him, Steve snapped out a gun. That knife had been thrown and had come from the black, narrow mouth of an alley, just at the end of the building against which Steve was flattened.

Steve darted forward, turned into the alley, cold anger overriding all sense of cooler-headed caution. He was crouched low, gun level, ready to shoot at the first threat. There was a rush of running feet at the far end of the alley and Steve sped after them. The alley was short, just the length of the building, and Steve was quickly through and into the open starlight beyond.

The light of the stars was tricky. Steve saw nothing for sure, but he did think he glimpsed the black bulk of a squat, bounding figure dropping swiftly into the gulf of blackness down the slope toward the river. It was still too uncertain to chance a shot, but Steve ran that way, searching. He found nothing. Whoever had thrown that knife was gone.

Steve circled back to the street where the luckless drunk had died. Men had found the sprawled figure and a crowd was gathering, noisy, profane, wondering. Steve joined that crowd, quiet, watchful and listening. A yell went up for Doc Munger who presently came hurrying. He dropped on a knee beside the dead man and made swift examination. Steve heard him tell the crowd:

"Never knew what hit him, probably.

The point of the knife drove through and severed the spinal cord."

Men picked the body up and carried it away. Steve Leland went back to the corrals and to his bunk in the harness shed, grim and thoughtful.

Out at Gold Hill the next day, Superintendent Roscoe glanced at the receipt Steve Leland handed him and exclaimed with satisfaction. "Good! Excellent! You got the first shipment of bullion safely through. We'll send out another ten thousand worth today."

"Make it twice that much, if you wish," said Steve grimly. "This will go through safely, too."

"You're not letting your success yesterday make you too confident, are you?" asked Roscoe cautiously. "You're not overlooking—"

"I'm not overlooking anything," cut in Steve. "I'm taking all precautions."

"Very well," conceded Roscoe. "Twenty thousand it is. With that safely at the Ehrenberg offices, I'll begin sleeping soundly of nights."

ROLLING down the miles from Gold Hill, Red Haslam grinned across at Steve. "Never felt so important in my life, sitting on top of twenty thousand in treasure. We got to make this trip good, Steve."

"We'll make it good. And Red, no matter what might happen, if trouble does break in Thirsty Pass, you're not to wait for me. Pour the leather to your team and ride it through to Ehrenberg!"

It was midafternoon when they rolled up to the big dry wash east of the Coppers and Thirsty Pass. As the stage dipped sharply into it, Steve's searching glance picked up movement at the ragged gray edge of the mesquite thickets along the far bank of the wash. He pointed.

"Tug is on the job. Good luck, Red. Take things through. I won't be far away."

Steve laid his sawed-off shotgun on the seat and moved back across the top of the stage. As he dropped off the lurching rear boot, Tug Carter swung up on it.

"Splinter's in the mesquite about a hundred yards along, Steve. Be seeing you!"

The stage had not stopped. There had been no break in the travel of the dust cloud drifting with it. This was important, if eyes were watching from the vicinity of Thirsty Pass. The distance was too great for any details to be made out, but not too great for the steady drift of the dust cloud, or a break in it, to be noted.

Steve found Splinter and the horse whickered softly at sight of its master. Steve's saddle and other riding gear were piled under a mesquite bush, for Tug Carter had unsaddled the horse while waiting the hours out. Steve quickly cinched the saddle in place, mounted, climbed out of the wash. He struck off into the lift of the barren, rugged Coppers, swinging wide to the north and west.

As he rode, Steve drew the heavy Sharps rifle from its saddle boot and checked it briefly. From his saddle bags he drew a double handful of long, yellow, deadly-looking cartridges, slipped one into the chamber of the rifle, put the rest in his jeans pocket. He carried the rifle across the saddle in front of him.

Splinter was rested, fresh, eager to go, and Steve put the animal fully to the climb. The crest of the Coppers was wild, rugged country, with Thirsty Pass the only open break across it for a good hundred miles, north or south. Splinter was dark with sweat when Steve topped out and began working south along the broken crest, wary and watchful.

At a point where the rugged crest broke sharply off and ran down into Thirsty Pass, Steve dismounted and went forward on foot to study the pass below. The gut of it was a good half-mile distant, the stage road a brown ribbon against the gray of the slab rock and scattered sage, clinging to the north side of the pass, all the way across. Because of this, Steve reasoned that if a holdup attack did come, it would be from the north.

He was fully aware that all this maneuvering might turn out to be completely useless, with no holdup attempt in the offing at all. But it was a precaution that had to be taken.

Careful survey showed nothing moving down there. The sun poured down, blistering hot, and sweat furrowed the dust on Steve's lean jaw.

To do any good, Steve saw he had to get closer to the gut of the pass, which meant going in on foot, for there was not enough cover for a man on horseback. He left Splinter behind a stone outcrop, ground-reined. To his left and below him, a drifting dust shroud marked the slow climbing approach of the stage. In less than a scant half-hour it would be rolling through the pass.

A low, twisting rock ridge, angling down the slope, gave Steve cover for some four hundred yards. The ridge broke abruptly into a little, rock-rimmed and hidden pocket. And there, hugging the west side of the pocket, where blue shadow was beginning to form, were five saddled horses, ground-reined and resting. Three of the saddles were for human use, the other two were pack saddles, with a pair of rawhide alforjas slung across them.

ON A SHELTERED bench looking directly down into Thirsty Pass and within point-blank rifle range of the stage road, three men crouched in hiding, cursing the blistering heat and the slow approach of the stage. When the dusty Concord finally wheeled into view, they stirred and made ready with their weapons.

Above them broke the sharp clatter of running hoofs and they turned to see five horses racing across the slope, three with empty stirrups flapping, the other two with empty alforjas bouncing. Their horses!

Crouched at the rim of the pocket from which he had deliberately stampeded the horses, Steve Leland looked along the sights of the big Sharps rifle. Setting those horses to running, Steve figured, would be the quickest, surest way to flush their owners. It was.

He saw the three men jerk into view, weapons poised. The big Sharps steadied, smashed roaring report. Downslope, one of the startled men swayed as though struck by a strong wind, then crumpled down. Instantly the other two were running along the shoulder of the pass, trying desperately to head the horses.

Again and again and again the Sharps rifle bellowed. It was tricky shooting, at tricky, dodging targets, very small in the immensity of rock and brush about them. At his fifth shot, Steve whisked another renegade aside and down.

Before starting the horses running, Steve had looped reins about saddle horns. The reins of one had jerked free, were dragging, and tangled in an old brush snag. Toward this animal the remaining renegade was racing.

Twice slugs from the Sharps scattered rock dust on the fellow. Another shot dropped him, just a yard or two short of the horse. But he was up, staggering, to rip the tangled reins free, lurch heavily into the saddle, and speed away. The breaking curve of the slope hid him before Steve Leland could get in another shot.

Steve went down the slope to the two men he had dropped.

Through warm, blue dusk, the stage rolled into Ehrenberg, with Steve Leland riding beside it. It paused briefly at the corrals, where two dead men were lifted from it, laid out and covered with blankets. It went on the mine offices, where several heavy, precious bars of gold bullion were unloaded. Then it returned to the corrals.

Steve Leland went over to the Joslyn cabin. Kansas Joslyn was taking a tray of supper in to her father. She said, "I hope you haven't eaten. John Munger was going to have supper with us, but he was called away on an emergency. Another shooting scrape, I think. I can set a small table in Dad's room and we'll all eat in there together."

Steve could have told her that he did not care to eat food she had prepared for another man, but there was a faint eagerness about her, as though she was honestly proffering the olive branch, so he nodded gravely and said, "That will be just right."

Jeff Joslyn was tickled at Steve's word of twenty thousand in bullion brought safely through. "That's great work, Steve. And I'm plenty relieved, because for some

queer reason I had the feeling all day that this trip would bring trouble."

"It did," said Steve quietly. And then he told tersely of what had taken place back at Thirsty Pass. Kansas Joslyn paled as she listened and she looked at Steve almost fearfully.

"The two you downed and brought in —ever see them before?" asked Jeff Joslyn eagerly.

"I never did, but Red Haslam named them. One by name of Garlock and the other a breed, Kokomo."

CHAPTER V

WHEN Steve was ready to leave, Kansas Joslyn went to the door with him again. She said slowly, "You are rather a terrible man, aren't you? You killed two men today Now you go in search of more. And—"

"There was Danny, remember. And Bill Daggett and Joe Bannon and your own father. Also, you may have heard of a poor devil found with a knife in his throat the other night. Well, that knife was thrown—and meant for me. In the light

"Jake Sloniker men!" exclaimed Joslyn harshly. "Well, that's been my hunch all along."

Steve nodded. "I'm rounding up Sloniker and putting the heat on him, after supper. Also, I want to tip off Doc Munger, so he'll let me know if somebody shows up for treatment from the effects of a Sharps slug. That one who managed a getaway, I don't know whether he managed to make it here to Ehrenberg, or not. If he did and Doc Munger is called in, I want to know about it."

of such things, what would you have me do?"

"I am not blaming you," said the girl. "You did not let me finish. I was about to say that as long as Dad had to get into this stage-line business, I'm glad he drew a man like you for a partner. You see, I am thinking with my head now, not my emotions."

He looked down at her. She stood very fair in his eyes. "Keep on giving me an even break in your thoughts, Kansas Joslyn. I need that."

Doc Munger's office door was dark, and locked. A few doors farther along, Steve saw Red Haslam and Tug Carter come out of a hashhouse.

Steve said, "Want to curry the town with me, Red?"

Red's eyes gleamed, his ready grin wide. "Do I!"

"Got a gun?"

Red patted a bulge under his shirt. "Where do we start?"

"Doc Munger had an emergency call to tend some hombre packing lead. I want to locate that hombre. Also, Mister Jake Sloniker. Also, Mister Mort Peynall. We got off to a good start today at Thirsty Pass. We might as well make the fumigating job complete."

They combed all of the larger saloons and gambling halls and drew a blank in every one. "You figure that hombre you got lead into, but didn't stop complete, might be Sloniker—or Peynall?" asked Red.

"It wouldn't be a bad guess. We'll know when we find the man Doc Munger is working on."

"I've heard it said that Peynall and Mexican Bob sometimes hit the bottle together down at Mexican Bob's shanty by the river," Red said. "Might pay to take a look."

They went down there. It was the worst part of a frontier town that was raw and rough from any angle. The smell of the river came up through the hot darkness. The river, thought Steve, had a presence, raw, hungry and wildly powerful. The affairs of men did not amount to much alongside that river.

"That's it," muttered Red. "And there's a light."

They went in quietly, warily. It was a mean little hovel, with two rooms apparently. The light shone in what passed for a kitchen. Steve peered carefully in at the kitchen window and went very still. In there, his sleeves rolled high, Doc Munger was scrubbing over a basin. Jake Sloniker came in from the other room and then Mort Peynall. Both looked sullen, particularly Peynall.

Peynall's voice came easily through the flimsy wall of the shanty, and it was harsh and ugly. "I'm wondering if you did your best on Bob, Doc. Or did you deliberately make that slip that let him go out so quick? Damn it—I didn't like that, in there. In his way, Mexican Bob was a good man, and faithful."

Doc Munger, toweling hands and forearms dry, rolled down his sleeves and put on his coat. Then, staring at Mort Peynall unwinkingly he said curtly, "Mexican Bob was a fool. He messed up that stage job today and last night he messed up that knife job I sent him on. He was losing his nerve. The next thing would have been talking too much. It's just as well that he is dead."

"Sure," growled Peynall. "Mexican Bob is dead. So, from what he told me, is Nick Garlock and Kokomo. Poor pay for all they've done for you. Next thing, maybe, it won't worry you a bit if Jake and me were dead. That would leave a lot of gold bullion stored in your safe, and all yours. It's high time we had a divvy. I'm calling for it—now!"

Doc Munger picked up his satchel with his left hand and started to turn for the door. "Sure," he said. "Right now!"

He whirled back, right hand darting into his coat pocket. It came out, gripping a gun. And then Mort Peynall shot him, drawing fast as a striking snake. Doc Munger fell on his face.

Jake Sloniker had just time to snarl, "Mort! You damned fool!" Then Peynall shot again and Jake Sloniker spun slowly and fell across a rickety table, upsetting it with a crash.

PEYNALL watched both men he had killed with eyes red as a weasel's. "Now there won't be any divvy. It will be all mine. I know you carry the combination to your safe in that little book of yours, Munger. By morning I'll have that bullion and be a long way gone. The game was washed up, anyhow. That damn Leland hombre! Everything would be complete if I could just get lead into him before I pull out."

Peynall was bent over Doc Munger and had just brought a small notebook into view when Steve Leland kicked open the

door and stepped in, a big Dragoon Colt revolver level and ready.

Mort Peynall made the mistake of trying to straighten up before shooting. That made him a split second slow. A smashing slug from the Dragoon Colt took him squarely in the center of the chest.

Steve paused only long enough to recover Doc Munger's notebook and blow out the light. Then he backed into the night and closed the door.

"Let's get out of here, Red!" he snapped.

They circled around to come into town from the lower end. They had heard some shouting and evidence of alarm up in town over the sound of that shooting, but already the town was quiet again.

"With no light in that shanty and the door shut they won't be found before morning," murmured Steve. "Which is just as well. It will give us time to work."

"But—but Doc Munger!" blurted th still astounded Red. "He was in with that gang, Steve—the leader of it, from the way things sounded back there. Will that news set this town—"

"That's news which will never get out, Red," said Steve harshly. "What you've already heard and seen this night, and what you are going to see, must be forgotten. You'll speak no word of it to anyone, ever. For there were people who believed in Doc Munger, who thought he was what he appeared to be. The truth would hurt them very much, so they must never know."

"But they'll find Munger—find Sloniker—Peynall—"

"That's right. But they'll never guess the real answer. Maybe they'll figure that Doc Munger was shot down in an argument over collecting a fee or something of the sort. The evidence is there that he'd been working on this Mexican Bob hombre. And we'll see that it gets out that Sloniker and Peynall and Mexican Bob had been members of the outlaw gang that had pulled the stage holdups. But Munger's part must never be known. That's a promise, Red?"

"It's a promise. Where do we go now?"

"Munger's office."

They waited until midnight and the town was quiet, when they went in by a side window which they pried open. By carefully shielded matchlight they found the safe. The combination taken from a leaf of Doc Munger's notebook proved correct. The bullion bars were there, stacked neatly.

WHEN the stage rolled into Ehrenberg through the dusk of the next evening, carrying bullion after an uneventful trip, Steve Leland and Red Haslam found Ben and Tug Carter full of exciting news. News of a cabin full of dead men, one of whom was Doc Munger. All of the saloons and other public gathering places were full of the same news. Steve got several of the better citizens of the town together and expressed the sober opinion that Sloniker and Peynall and Mexican Bob were members of the gang that had been robbing the stage and who were responsible for the deaths of Joe Bannon and Bill Daggett and Danny Leland.

"In those holdups, gentlemen, some twenty thousand dollars in bullion was stolen. Bullion is hard to dispose of, unless through recognized mine ownership channels. That loot is probably hidden somewhere in this town. Has any search been made for it around that cabin of Mexican Bob's?"

No, they told Steve, there had been no such search, but it might be a good idea to make one now. A representative from the mine offices was only too glad to join in the search. But it was Red Haslam who, with convincing innocence, discovered a board in the floor that was suspiciously loose. They pulled it up and under it found a sack containing the missing bullion.

Going back uptown, Red murmured guardedly to Steve, "If we weren't honest men, who had done the right thing I'd find myself figuring that you and me were crooks, too, Steve. We sure did a lot of slick scheming and work. Well, it's done with and forgotten. And there won't be any more excitement along Thirsty Pass."

Several weeks went by and Jeff Joslyn was up and around with the aid of a cane

before the Joslyn cabin began to get back its old, cheery, homey atmosphere. Yet there were times when old Jeff stared searchingly at Steve Leland. One day when Kansas was uptown shopping, Jeff said abruptly:

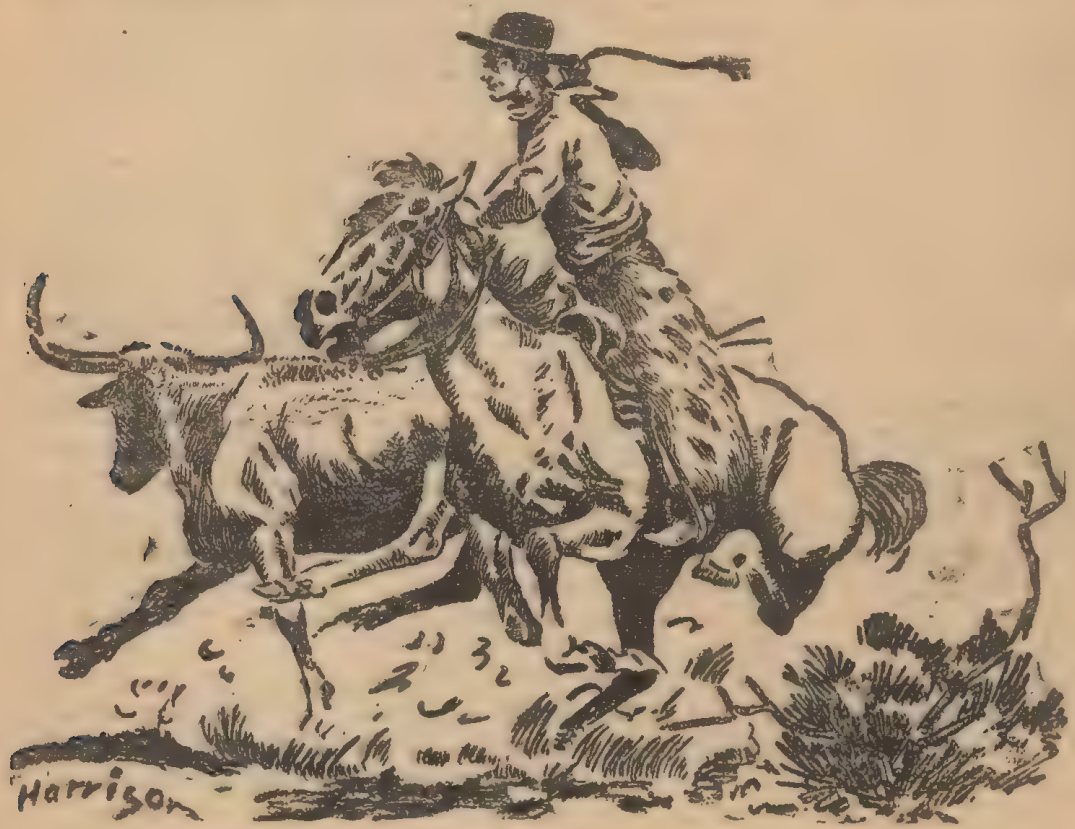
"Suppose you tell me the truth of what happened that night in Mexican Bob's shanty, Steve. I don't find it so easy as some to swallow the accepted theory—that John Munger was shot down by an outlaw gang because he'd stumbled onto something they didn't want known. I keep asking myself questions, like, who shot down the man who shot down Munger? Sloniker didn't, because his gun hadn't been fired. And Munger didn't, because his hadn't either. So—who did? I'm remembering that you were searching for Munger that night."

"All right," shrugged Steve. "You're a wise old fox. But Kansas must never know—that Munger was the head of the gang. Here is what happened."

Steve told the story. When he ended he added, "Your promise, Jeff. You'll never tell Kansas. Munger's death hurt her enough. She must never know the truth about him."

"Kansas knows," said a voice from the doorway.

She came in quietly, her arms full of groceries. She put them on the kitchen table and turned to Steve. "Kansas is not a fool, either. The same things that had Dad wondering had Kansas wondering. The more she thought of things, the closer she came to the answer. It was the same answer you've just given Dad."



She smiled. "You needn't look so shame-faced and stricken, Steve. It was mighty sweet of you to try to protect my feelings. But the truth is best, really. For it wipes out the past completely. Dad—where are you going?"

"I been promising myself a trip over to the corrals," vowed Jeff Joslyn stoutly. "My leg feels good. So I'm making that trip now. And I don't want anybody along. I want to smell corral dust and listen to horses chomping hay. Give me another two weeks and I'll be riding whip again. Don't argue. I'm going."

And he went.

Powdersmoke Extra

By Wilson L. Covert

In order to prove the pen mightier than the pistol, Link Moberly had to set his news in six-gun slugs—and peddle his papers for powdersmoke dinero.

THE three riders checked rein on Lipan's main street to scan the lettering on the plate-glass window, the lips of the two men moving silently as they spelled out the words. The feminine member of the party, a girl with tawny, shoulder-length hair and well-rounded figure, lifted her reins to ride on.

"Hold it, Dell," said the elder man, sliding out of the saddle. "I got to interview this newspaper feller. He must've opened shop here the last few days."

Dell Teagle frowned a little. "Hope that you're not hunting trouble, Dad."

Brax Teagle grinned. His face was leathery, hardly wrinkled, his eyes had a steely brightness. "I never hunt trouble, Sis. Come along with us."

Dell swung to the ground, followed her father and his foreman into the office of the Lipan *Weekly Bugle*. The girl caught the odor of printer's ink as she crossed the threshold, noticed the hand-worked printing press and cases of type at the back of the room. Then her gray eyes rested on the sole occupant of the office, a man of the same height and wiry

leanness as Brax Teagle, but less than half the latter's age. A smiling, bronzed young man in a flannel shirt, with a black tie, and dark trousers, who looked as if he could straddle the wildest bronc that ever went after a rider.

"You the boss of this shebang?" Teagle opened up.

"Yes, Link Moberly's the name," the other nodded. "First issue of the *Bugle* isn't ready yet. I'm looking for a printer to help me. They're a bit scarce in a frontier town. I take it you folks are ranching in the district."

"That's correct. I'm Brax Teagle. Run the Bar T horse outfit. Sell a lot of horses to the Wesson Stage Line, here in town." Teagle waved a hand toward his companions. "My daughter, Dell, and my foreman, Hegan. I stopped in to ask what kind of a paper you aim to publish. The last newspaperman in Lipan ended up by bein' rode out of town on a rail."

Moberly's smile thinned. "I heard about Cal Blake. He urged the citizens to band together and clean up the town. Before they could do it, the bad hats he was hitting took a hand and got rid of him. I haven't been here long enough to know all that's going on, Mr. Teagle, but if a cleanup is what's needed, I'll run my paper along similar lines."

Teagle said, "Blake printed lies about certain people, includin' my outfit. If you're minded to follow his lead, you'll need to be a fast shot to stay aboveground." He eyed the young man's slim, belted waist, devoid of hardware trimming. "Where's your death spreader?"

"I don't often carry one." There was a sudden bleakness in Moberly's dark eyes. "I can shoot a little, I've been a cowhand. But you've heard it said, 'the pen is mightier than the sword'."

Teagle guffawed, his foreman grinned, but the girl's face was troubled. "Never heard of anybody gettin' killed with a stick of type, Moberly," said Brax.

"No?" said Link. "A newspaper, fighting for the right and arousing public opinion, has more than once brought about action to unseat rascals who were riding high. You have a good town here, Mr. Teagle, but it needs to expand. Being a terminal for the stage line, it should be twice as big as it is. Something has stunted its growth."

"And you're goin' all out to make it grow?" said Teagle.

"I am," Moberly's smile returned, "and I'm sure I can count on the support of a man with a daughter like yours."

He saw a light grow in Dell's eyes, a warm rush of color to her cheeks. Then the eager look died. She said, almost dully, "Of course, my father and I wish your paper all success, Mr. Moberly."

Teagle nodded. "Just don't smear me in print, young feller, and we'll get along."

"If you mean printing lies about you, I won't do that." Moberly held out his hand. "Drop in any time, all of you." Shaking hands with the girl, he added, "When I get a saddle horse, I may ride out to the Bar T."

Dell answered, rather faintly, "You can't miss the ranch."

LINK MOBERLY, watching them walk out to the horses, thought, *She didn't seem anxious to have me visit them. I wonder why?* He turned to his desk, then faced about alertly at the scuff of feet entering the office. An oldster with a fringe of whiskers, an ancient, tall silk hat awry on his bushy head and clad in coat and trousers that didn't match, was shuffling toward him, wearing a solemn look.

"I'm 'Stovepipe' Spale," the man announced. "Leastways, that's what the boys call me on account of the headpiece. I like to go 'round dressed up when I'm not workin'. And I ain't worked since Cal Blake was chased out of Lipan. I was his printer."

Moberly's face showed surprise. "I've noticed you around town. A printer, eh? Why didn't you look me up before and apply for the job?"

"I wasn't sure you had guts till I overheard you talkin' to Brax Teagle. He didn't scare you, and if you want to pick up where Blake left off, I'm your man. But I opine, Moberly, that what this town needs most is a boot hill graveyard with all the bad hats planted in it. The

good folks know there's killin' and horse-liftin', but, even if they were sure who the guilty parties were, they'd be too timorous to act without a fightin' leader. Sheriff, up at the county seat, don't bother his head about us."

Moberly said, "I suppose the stage company corrals draw the horse thieves?"

"Yes, and they're raided pretty often. But Brax Teagle is always handy to sell Burke, the agent, replacement stock. If you ask me, Brax steals those horses himself, creatin' a steady market, then palmin' 'em off on Burke with the brands changed. Cal Blake suspected it."

Moberly grimaced. "Because his daughter seems the right sort, I don't like to think Teagle is a low-down horse thief. Still, that wouldn't stop me from exposing him if it's true. What about these killings?"

"Well," said Spale, "there's the usual number of saloon shootings, but what I'm alludin' to is the stage passengers that turn up missin'. You see, it's a one-night stop-over for folks goin' east or west on this division. They put up at Cadden's Hotel. When a passenger don't show up at the stage station, Brick Cadden claims he checked out of the hotel and has witnesses, his gun-totin' staff, to prove it. But I say they were killed, robbed, and planted."

Moberly's eyes narrowed. "If a man, working on the quiet, got the evidence against these killers and horse thieves and spread it across the front page of his paper, maybe the townsmen would get busy. I'll think it over, Spale. You're hired. I have enough copy to start the press running. I'll have more before the week's out."

As Link moved to his desk and shuffled the papers, Spale took off his stovepipe hat, brushed it carefully with his sleeve. The removal of his coat showed that he wore a shoulder harness. There was a gleam in his owlish eyes as he rolled up his sleeves.

"If you own a gun, Link," he said, "better dust it off."

Moberly laughed. "Not yet, Stovepipe." He was still thinking, "The pen is mightier—"

THAT initial issue of the Lipan *Weekly Bugle* sold better than Moberly anticipated. Containing such local items as Link had been able to gather in the past few days, the editorial reminded the citizens of their opportunities for expanding the town, but there was no appeal to root out the bad hats. Moberly was saving that until he had the undesirables dead to rights. If they didn't think he was going to fight them, it would put them off their guard.

Before the second issue was off the press, Brax Teagle reined up at the *Bugle* office one day, leading a dun horse. He came in to lounge in a chair by Moberly's desk, asking, finally, to see a copy of the *Bugle*. He perused it with sharp eyes, folded it with a chuckle.

"You're gettin' off on the right foot, Link. Notice you mentioned the visit we paid you last week. Dell will be pleased. Sent her regards. Come out and look at the horse I brought with me. Best in my string."

Moberly went out to the sidewalk with him. When the newspaperman spoke enthusiastically of the dun's fine points, Teagle said with a broad smile, "If you ain't bought a saddle horse yet, take him."

Link was a bit reluctant to accept the animal, in view of the suspicions voiced by Spale. After Teagle had gone, Moberly returned to his desk to ponder, leaving the horse at the hitching post. Stovepipe, at the rear of the office, remarked:

"Looks like Brax is encouragin' you to do right by him."

"You mean the horse is a sort of bribe to keep his name out of the paper, the next time there's a raid? He gave you a sharp look, Spale."

"I saw the old sinner. Well, what do *you* think, Moberly?"

Link reached for his wide-brimmed hat. "That bronc's brand doesn't appear to have been tampered with, and I hope you're wrong, Stovepipe. But if Brax is a thief, he can't buy my silence."

Leading the dun upstreet to stage headquarters, Moberly hunted up Burke, a middle-aged man with a dependable

look. Link asked the agent if he recognized the dun as an animal that had been stolen from his corrals. Burke walked around it, noting the brand.

"We have so many horses, duns among 'em, it's nearly impossible to say this or that horse is ours," he said. "And it could hardly be a company animal, with Teagle's brand on it. The horse thieves been raidin' him, too? Where'd you get it?"

"Presented to me by Teagle himself," replied Link, observing no change in the division agent's face. Evidently, Burke did not share Spale's distrust of the Bar T boss. Moberly led the horse toward the livery stable.

As he returned to the street, the incoming stage whirled by in a cloud of dust. Watching the passengers alight and walk toward Cadden's Hotel, Moberly suddenly moved in the same direction. Until the stage left in the morning, all would be guests at the hostelry to which Spale had given a sinister name. Link stepped into the hotel lobby as the new arrivals were registering. He looked them over carefully for signs of prosperity that might make them objects of cupidity. A gray-haired couple, probably a cowman and his wife, an army officer, a man in ministerial black and a darkly tanned, younger man, wearing two guns and lugging a suitcase. If he had been carrying a warsack, Link would have believed he was a cowpuncher. He put the suitcase between his feet while registering.

Brick Cadden, redheaded and hog-fat, waddled near, nodding to Link. "Gatherin' news for the paper, Moberly?"

Link grinned back. "Yes. Got to fill up the pages."

He was back at his office as the shadows lengthened on the main street, getting Spale's owl-eyed attention with the announcement:

"I'm doing a little sleuthing at the hotel tonight. A man named Coyle came in on the stage—I got a peek at the register—and he looks as if he might be carrying a lot of money. Bank messenger or something. If I guessed that much, and you're right about Cadden, Brick is sure to catch on and plot murder. It's my chance to show him up."

"Be plenty risky, Link. If you ain't got a gun, take mine."

Link hesitated. "Guess you're right. I have a .45 and I'll wear it."

AFTER supper, Moberly entered the hotel bar. Coyle was there. He did little drinking and refused to sit in a poker game when someone asked him. Link observed several flint-eyed loungers giving Coyle a covert attention. Once Cadden lumbered in, caught sight of Moberly, and asked, "Still lookin' for news?"

Link replied, "Never can tell when or where you'll strike something worth printing, Brick."

Before Coyle left the barroom, Moberly drifted into the lobby. The hotel was a three-story building, with rooms on all floors. Link had noted the number of Coyle's room, on the ground floor. When he thought himself unobserved, he went down the narrow hall. The room to the left of Coyle's was unoccupied. He felt his way to the bed and sat down to wait.

Not long afterward, Moberly heard Coyle come into the adjoining room and lock the door. Boots thudded on the floor, a bed creaked under the man's weight. It must have been midnight before quiet settled over the hotel, a quiet presently broken by stealthy steps in the hall. Link rose from the bed, pulling the six-shooter stuck in his waistband. He softly opened his door and looked out. Quickly as he had moved, the door of the other room was closing behind the intruders, who must have let themselves in with a passkey.

In two strides, Moberly was at Coyle's door, palming the knob. Pushing the door slowly inward, he caught a shuddering gasp from the direction of the bed. There was a faint light in the room. As he went in sideways, he saw a man holding a match and another, knife in hand, bending over the twitching form of Coyle.

Both robbers wheeled, eyes glaring, at the faint rustling that betrayed Moberly's presence. In the instant that he recognized them as two of the barroom

loungers who had been watching Coyle, the man with the knife hurled the steel. It struck the wall as Moberly ducked.

The match went out and a tongue of gunflame lit the room. But Link hadn't been standing still. He triggered back. With a stricken cry, a solid body slammed across the bed, making the bed slats crack. Moberly crouched, waiting for the second robber to open up and target himself.

A sound at the window, which was raised from the bottom, shifted his attention from the corner where the bed stood. A dark form blocked the aperture, and a blaze of powder answered Link's quick shot. Already astride the sill, the robber tumbled outward.

The pondrous steps of Cadden, down the hall, reached Moberly. And Brick wasn't alone. If they caught Link there, he wouldn't get out alive to tell what he knew. By the light of the robber's match, he had seen the suitcase standing by the bed. Link groped to it, dropped it into the alley, then swiftly followed. The money he believed that suitcase contained would never be recovered if it fell into Cadden's hands.

At the moment he jumped into the alley, Moberly became aware that the robber he had thought dead was alive and beating a retreat. He was blundering along at the upper end of the alley. Suitcase in one hand, Colt in the other, Link stole after him. The robber was glancing up and down the dark street when Moberly's gun rammed him in the back.

"Steer for the *Bugle* office!" Moberly growled.

The newspaper office was one of the few places lighted up at that hour. As Link drove his prisoner in ahead of him, Stovepipe, smeary with ink, made a quick grab for something to tie the robber. Secured to a chair, the fellow watched through slitted eyes as Moberly broke open the suitcase, displaying neat packages of bills. That Coyle had been a bank messenger, conveying cash from one town to another, was proven by credentials tucked in a pocket of the suitcase.

Moberly's prisoner wouldn't talk, so the newspaperman sat down at his desk and began to write hurriedly on a pad of paper, calling to Spale:

"Kill that front page and set this up as fast as I feed it to you. I'll have a sizzling editorial to go with it. We'll bust this town wide open tomorrow morning!"

WORKING together for the balance of the night, the piles of newssheets were ready at dawn. Nobody from Cadden's came to disturb them, though they kept their six-guns handy. Perhaps, since one robber had vanished, Brick thought he had killed his pal and fled with the bank money. Locking the prisoner in the office, Moberly and Spale went out for an early breakfast and to pick up town boys to sell the papers.

Returning to the *Bugle* office with a half dozen youngsters in tow, they didn't notice that the robber, struggling frenziedly during their absence, had all but freed himself. They followed the last boy out with his bundle of papers, stood awhile on the sidewalk, discussing the probable result when the headline, CADDEN'S BUSINESS IS ROBBERY AND MURDER, struck the town between the eyes.

An excited citizen came along, a paper tucked under his arm, and demanded to know if what he had just read was all true. Link assured him it was, that he would produce one of the robbers and the bank money in due time.

"If you're going near stage headquarters," said Moberly, "you might tell Burke I'm holding that suitcase for him."

The citizen, declaring it was time for a cleanup, departed. Stovepipe was first to re-enter the office. He gasped and pointed to the prisoner's empty chair. "How in tarnation did that skunk get loose?"

They began a hurried search, but the robber, escaping by the back window, was nowhere in the vicinity. He had been in too great a haste to bother with the suitcase, undoubtedly had made tracks for Cadden's Hotel. Link was much irritated, but still thought he had Brick in a tight corner.

He wasn't surprised when, from the office doorway, he saw a bunch of men

leave the hotel and start down the street, led by the waddling Cadden. Other citizens were converging on the newspaper office, arriving almost as soon as the hostile Cadden party. Moberly had donned a gunbelt. Spale was at his side, coat off to display the shoulder harness.

"You ink-slingin' blackguard!" bellowed Brick, "I dare you to walk out in the street! What you mean by sayin' I kill and rob my guests? I admit one of 'em was murdered last night and his luggage stole—"

Link interrupted sternly, "No chance to bury this victim and claim he checked out of the hotel, eh, Brick? I was there when it happened!"

He moved from the doorway to the sidewalk, the printer keeping pace with him. Setting an example of fearlessness, Link figured, was his best bet to win the support of the better citizens.

"Yeh, you was there!" roared Cadden. "And if you wasn't mixed up in it yourself, where's the robber you say you captured?"

"Hiding in your hotel, I expect, since he got loose awhile ago!"

"That's a lie," Brick hollered, "like everything else in your rotten sheet! You're tryin' to frame me to cover your own tracks!"

The hands of Cadden's gunmen slashed down. Moberly drew like a flash. Two bullets, missing him, splintered the door frame. His gun jetted flame and a slender gunman, dropping his smoking Colt, went into a jerky death dance.

Stovepipe, thumbing hammer, sent another reeling. But the citizens Link had counted on to pitch in were holding aloof. A doubt had risen in their minds, since Moberly couldn't produce the captive robber.

Cadden pressed the advantage their hesitation afforded him. He yanked his own gun, but a bullet slammed into his fat shoulder as the weapon cleared leather. Moberly had shot wide of the mark that time, being the center of a leadstorm which threatened to cut him and Spale down.

Fighting for his life, Link was conscious of hoof beats, but gave no heed until the gunmen in the street began to scatter, preceded by the townsfolk. Horsemen swept past the embattled pair on the sidewalk, who drew back, tilting up their smokepoles. Link saw Brax Teagle leading the charge. As he triggered, the horse-rancher yelled:

"What for you jumpin' my friend Moberly! Clear the street!"

Clutching his shoulder and cursing, Cadden was foremost in the retreat. Teagle, seeing they weren't going to stand up to his outfit, wheeled his mount and called off his ranch hands. He quit the saddle close to where Moberly and Spale stood, firing questions.

"I'll show you what started it, Teagle," said Link. "Come into the office. You certainly arrived in the nick of time. If the citizens had acted when they should—but what's the use of talking!"

He showed Teagle a copy of the paper denouncing Cadden. Skimming over it, Brax glanced sharply at the suitcase beside Moberly's desk. "That the money? It's a good thing we rode in this mornin'. Now, let's you and Spale and me go get a drink. We'll see if Cadden's bunch will crowd you again.

"Stand guard here, boys," he addressed his hands, who had drifted into the office, "in case any of 'em sneak back."

DESPITE the rancher's timely interference, Moberly felt uncomfortable at receiving help from a man he did not fully trust. He saw that Stovepipe shared his feelings. The trip to the saloon and back was uneventful, though some of Cadden's crowd watched them from a distance. Teagle didn't offer to clean out Cadden's Hotel, and Moberly, not wishing to be more indebted than he already was, didn't suggest it. It was a job for the Lipan citizens themselves.

Brax seemed in a hurry to be gone, saying they were on their way to purchase horses at a distant ranch. The cavalcade rode off in a flurry of dust. A half hour afterward, the division agent and a dozen or so townsmen sheepishly presented themselves at the *Bugle* office.

"We've been talkin' things over,

Moberly," said Burke. "Maybe we ought-'ve backed you up instead of lettin' Cadden's talk confuse us. It did seem a little funny that robber should escape, but if you have that bank money that messenger was carryin'—"

Moberly turned swiftly toward his desk, seized the handle of the suitcase. Its lightness sent a chill along his spine. He opened it, and slowly raised his eyes from the empty receptacle to the grim faces of Burke and his companions. Stovepipe, owlish eyes bugging out, remarked:

"Most expensive drinks you and me ever h'isted, Link!"

Moberly slammed the suitcase on the floor, his cheeks white with anger. "How do you reach Teagle's ranch? Give me till sundown, Burke, and I'll be back with the money!"

He jammed on his hat and was out of the office before any of them could frame an answer. At the livery stable, he saddled the horse Teagle had given him. It ate up the sage-dotted miles north of Lipan. Teagle's outfit had ridden east, but Moberly had little doubt they had circled round and that he would find them at the Bar T. A haul like that would make it unnecessary to steal horses for some time.

Climbing the long slope of a hill and nearing his destination, Link knew by the sun's position that it was well past noon. A rider crossed the hilltop above him and started down. He caught the glint of sunlight on shoulder-length hair and sudden distaste for his errand assailed him. In a few moments he was alongside the girl, managing a smile.

"Coming to see us?" Dell asked, a little anxiously, he thought.

Moberly didn't want her to turn back. "It was your father I wanted to see, mainly, on a little business. Is he at home?"

Dell nodded. "I promised to visit a girl friend, who's lately been married. If I'd known you were coming—"

"Oh, that's all right," Link said. "See you later." He pushed on up the hill. It had escaped his notice that Dell's saddlebags were very bulky.

Moberly grounded his reins between the pole corral and the back door of the ranch house. He thought himself as yet undiscovered as he crept to a side window, where wrangling voices indicated trouble of some kind in the outfit. Surprise filled him as he listened.

"I think you fellers are puttin' somethin' over on me!" snarled Teagle. "Hegan says he bundled the money in his saddlebags while I had Moberly and Spale at the saloon, like I meant him to do. But when we get here, the cash is gone. You could've stashed it under a rock when we stopped on the trail to keep me from gettin' my share."

Hegan's voice replied heatedly, "I ain't a hog! I swear the money was on my saddle when I hung it on the corral fence, havin' to leave it there a few minutes because Dell was around and you didn't want her to get wise. This yellin' of yours, Brax, may be to cover up the fact you swiped them bundles of banknotes yourself when we wasn't lookin'."

"Maybe," suggested another ranch hand, "Dell heard us talkin' and took the money when she rode away, meanin' to give the green stuff to—"

"No," Teagle broke in violently, "she went a-visitin'! She didn't know we had the money. If she did, that girl wouldn't go back on her old man that way, even though she's always beggin' me to quit horse-liftin'."

At that moment, Moberly, outside the window, felt the cold ring of a pistol muzzle pressed against his neck. He kept his hand clear of his gun as he turned to face a scowling ranch hand.

"I hid on the other side of the corral when I seen you top the hill, Moberly. Walk around to the back door. Boss'll be tickled to see you."

Teagle, at least, showed vast surprise when Link was ushered in at gun's point. "Why, dang it, I thought I'd left you in a mess you couldn't shoot your way out of!" exclaimed the horse thief. "With the money gone, as well as that prisoner, I figured they'd hang you!"

For a minute, Moberly's lips were grimly sealed, then came scathing words. "And what gets me," Link finished, "is

how you came to have a daughter like Dell."

Brax said, "She takes after her ma. Well, I can't let you go, Link, and I ain't goin' to kill you here." He scratched his head. "Since that money has disappeared, and we're needin' some, we'll raid the stage corrals tonight. Guess the best thing is to take you along. Tied, of course."

"I'm washed up anyhow," said Link, "if I can't return with that bank money. I should've paid more heed to Spale's suspicion of you."

RIDING into Lipan with the Teagle gang late that night, Moberly saw a light in his office, a dim one. Spale apparently was keeping hopeful vigil. He wondered if the printer looked out as they passed by on the far side of the street. Every rider but Link was masked. But, whether Stovepipe saw them or not, sharp eyes and ears at Cadden's Hotel noted their approach. Brick, nursing a wounded shoulder and a grudge against the man he had long known was stealing stage company horses, dispatched a swift-footed messenger to stage headquarters and buckled on his Colt.

Flaming lead halted the raiders sixty yards from the stage corrals, belting two or three men out of leather before they could unsling smoke-irons. The rest recoiled, almost panic-stricken by the unexpected gunfire. They wheeled horses to run, Moberly fleeing with them because he couldn't do otherwise and the bullets were as likely to cut him down as anyone. His mount raced beside the fuming Teagle, who was twisted in the saddle, gun fogging.

As they thundered past Cadden's Hotel, guns blazed at them from pools of shadow. Horses and riders spilled in the dust. The voice of Cadden was heard roaring to kill 'em all. In that desperate moment it flashed through Link's mind that Brick must have warned stage headquarters of the raiders' coming.

Moberly's and Teagle's horses had both been hit, couldn't run much farther. The Cadden gang was closing in from behind. Teagle's horse thieves were through, all but the leader. Link shouted at Brax, "Head for my office!"

Spur-urged, the horses struggled on, collapsing in the street nearly opposite the door. Spale had doused the light, but he popped out at Moberly's yell. Teagle stood, emptying his gun at the men rushing downstreet, while Stovepipe wrestled with Link's bonds.

The three headed for the office together, Spale barring the door after they were inside. Teagle grabbed Moberly's arm in the dark, placed in his hand the Colt taken from him at the Bar T. There was no needless talk. They were in this together, with a pack of lobos outside. A volley shattered the front window. Three Colts replied, toppling as many Cadden gunmen. Brick, determined to end the fight before the townsmen took a hand, broke into the general store nearby.

A little later, Link sniffed, detecting the smell of kerosene mingled with the acrid powdersmoke. Tendrils of flame climbed the front wall, driving them farther back in the office. Teagle stumbled and went down. Crouched behind the desk, Moberly and Spale kept on firing. A bellow of agony reached them.

Stovepipe poked up his head. "That was Brick! We're gettin' 'em, one by—" He slid away from the desk with a groan as lead slashed through the mounting flames.

"Spale!" cried Link. But Stovepipe didn't answer.

Moberly was still on his knees by the badly chipped desk when the bullets stopped coming. Above the fire's hum he heard the voice of Burke:

"None of Cadden's crowd left. Teagle's horse thieves wiped out, all but Moberly, if that was his gun goin' as we came up. The man Brick sent to warn us reported Moberly with the raiders. He was thick with Teagle from the first. I ought've guessed it. I half suspected he wouldn't come back with that bank money. Watch for Moberly to break out when that fire gets too hot."

In time the roof crashed in, the walls crumbled, but no desperate newspaperman sprang forth with roaring gun. Moberly was far away, on the road to the Bar T. He had cleaned up the town, but,

branded an outlaw, he would have stretched hemp if he had faced those who were to benefit by his game fight. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

When the ruins had cooled enough for men to search for bodies, they found two, burned beyond recognition. One, judging by its shortness, was the remains of Stovepipe Spale, the other, tall and lean, was thought to be Link Moberly. While a crowd surrounded the charred bodies, cursing Moberly for a trickster, a wild-eyed girl pushed her way to the center of the group, lugging heavy saddlebags. She swayed as she looked at the taller corpse, then her horrified gaze sought the division agent.

"If that's Moberly, you ought to be blessing, not cursing him! He gave his life to clean up your town. You know me, Dell Teagle! My father's gone with the rest. Yes, he was a horse thief, and he stole this money, here, from Moberly's office. It was one crime too many for me. I brought it back. Not knowing who it belonged to or how to return it without betraying my father, I've been hanging around town for hours. Now I'm leaving and you won't see me again."

She dropped the saddlebags in front of Burke and stumbled, sobbing, through the stunned crowd. Minutes afterward they heard hoofbeats going away from Lipan. But Dell Teagle didn't take the trail to the Bar T, where Moberly waited. . . .

THE passing years saw Lipan rise from a crime-ridden little frontier town to a flourishing trade center. One day, two riders drew rein at the graveyard on the outskirts. The elder man, with gray at his temples, spoke:

"I had a hand in starting that boot hill, Son. The town has grown, just as I knew it would after the bad element was cleaned out. As you know, I found your mother by accident several months after that flaming night, and married her. She had mistaken her father's charred body for mine, just as the townsmen had. She told them of the debt they owed me, but I reckon they never believed her."

"It seems they did, though, Dad." The younger man pointed to a tombstone rising from a well-kept lot. "See what it says: *Erected by the grateful citizens of Lipan in memory of Link Moberly, who died fighting for a clean town.* Something below, in smaller letters, about Stovepipe Spale. Can't read it from here."

The elder horseman was leaning eagerly in the saddle. "I'm glad they didn't forget old Stovepipe! He stood shoulder to shoulder with me."

"Going to look up some of the oldsters, Dad?"

Link Moberly shifted in his saddle to gaze at the crowded streets, the rows upon rows of dwellings and business houses that had replaced the single street and the falsefronts. Slowly he shook his head. "I was young then, Son, like you. Most of the old-timers are probably dead. I've changed with the years, might be taken for an impostor. It's enough to know they realized what Stovepipe and I did for the community. Your mother will be glad to learn of it."

Hot-Lead Windup

By Art Kercheval

Eli Pepper was a wizard at tinkering with timepieces. But when he met up with that holdup hombre, he left his watches and rode out to fix the killer's clock.

IN HIS little watch repair shop in Quaking Aspen, Eli Pepper worked rapidly putting a balance wheel in Sheriff Dan Ordway's battered timepiece. He'd have to place a new mainspring in "Old Faithful," station agent Charley Jade's railroad watch, before his task was done this afternoon. That was why he didn't see the huge stranger come in. But he could hear his booted approach to the counter. Eli glanced up, a little startled.

The big man stopped before Eli, who was just rising from his work. As his puzzled gaze probed the other, Eli would have sworn he was looking into the face of a killer. Long ago, Eli had learned the significance of a gun tied down low on the thigh.

"So you're Eli Pepper?" the man asked. "Best watch repairman this side of Abilene, I hear. Let's see what you can do with this ticker!"

It was a gold watch. Eli's usually steady hands trembled a little as he took it. He turned it over and over in his palm, while a sudden burning haze was in his

eyes and grim realization churned in his brain. Punch Avery's watch!

Old Punch, who'd turned prospector after years of being Eli's partner in the watch repair business, had been ambushed a week ago at his mine. The killer had taken Punch's gold pokes as well as the watch. The watch had been damaged, Eli reasoned, when Punch fell.

"Busted the crystal and bent the hour hand, Mister," Eli spoke up, hoping the man would figure the catch in his voice was only a natural impediment. "Take a little time to fix 'er. Got a coupla rush jobs to handle first. If you'll just leave it—"

"To hell with the others!" the huge fellow blazed. "You'll drop whatever you're doin' and take care of that ticker!"

Eli nodded grimly. For the man jumped his Colt into his fist. Without another word, Eli laid aside the sheriff's watch and started on the stranger's. While his skillful hands worked, a slow anger seethed inside him.

Finally Eli could contain himself no longer. Eyes icy, he looked up and accused, "You killed my pard Punch Avery, Mister. That's why you're carryin' his watch."

At this, thick laughter rumbled out of the gunhawk. But in the next instant his mouth clamped shut and he took a step closer, gripping his gun tighter.

"You'll never live to tell it, so you might as well hear all of it. I did kill Avery. I'm Noe Cutsinger, and I came to this water-trough town to pull a bank job. This time tomorrow I'll be well over Fargo Pass, because I'm makin' my getaway on rails. Four o'clock this afternoon, a freight'll be crawlin' up the pass—"

CUTSINGER! Wanted killer and bank robber! The name penetrated Eli's consciousness like the twisting thrust of a dagger. Then, abruptly, Eli stiffened. Through the front window he saw tall, lithe Dan Ordway crossing the street. Sunflash glinted from his six-pointed star. Eli gulped. Cutsinger's boot heels gritted as he wheeled suddenly. He ripped out an oath as he saw the oncoming lawman. In a flash he whirled back on Eli.

"Got my hoss brush-tied out back, so your sheriff don't know I'm here!" he snapped. "I'm hidin' behind that curtain, but I'll have this gun ready for the first funny thing you say or do. Just so's that tin star don't smell a rat, I'll take back Avery's watch—"

Cutsinger had stationed himself when a grinning Dan Ordway stepped into the place.

"Hello, Eli," he hailed. "Is my watch ready?"

"Just about, Dan," Eli said without hesitation. "Had some delay. But all I gotta do is set 'er."

"Danged if you ain't a wizard, Eli, when it comes to watches!" Ordway chuckled, shaping a cigarette. "Never makin' a mistake in thirty years!"

Eli's mind groped in dizzy, meaningless circles. He wanted to tell the sheriff, somehow, that Punch's killer was within earshot. He stalled for time, wetting his lips nervously. A clock on a shelf ticked loudly in the small shop.

"There she is, Dan," Eli said finally, handing him the watch. "She'll run like a top now."

Ordway pocketed his timepiece. "See you later, Eli. Ridin' up into Gary Canyon this afternoon. Got a hot tip Noe Cutsinger's holed up there—"

"Sure," Eli nodded. "Take good care of that watch. You got the best ticker now in Quaking Aspen."

Did Ordway glance at him a little sharply then? No, Eli decided in the next instant, as Ordway pivoted and clumped out of the shop. As soon as Ordway was heading up the street, Cutsinger moved from his hiding place. There was a thin grin on his cold, twisted face.

"Good work, grandpap!" he said. "Wasn't a thing you said and done that put the sheriff hep."

Eli watched Cutsinger walk to the front door then, watched him peer up and down the street. "Yep, it's made to order," Cutsinger mused, facing Eli again. "Sheriff's ridin' for Gary Canyon, just like I planned. When this Colt makes music, Pepper, it'll bring the townfolks thisaway. Meanwhile, I'll be headin' for

the other end—bent on bank business." He laughed softly.

Before Eli's wide-staring eyes, the killer squeezed trigger. A giant hand cuffed at Eli, as he tried to throw himself out of line, a heart-crushing force that slammed him to the floor behind the counter. After that, his world was suddenly smothered in blackness, and he knew no more.

By all counts he should have been dead. But he wasn't. He realized this dimly, a few minutes later, as he struggled out of the void of unconsciousness. His returning world loomed up as a maze of unreality, for Eli knew he didn't belong in it at all. Not when Cutsinger had shot him through the heart! Still in a cobwebby stupor, he rose to a sitting position. He winced, suppressing a groan. There was a hellish pain about his heart.

AT LAST, convinced he was much alive, he staggered to his feet. Steadying himself, he probed the pain further. He found the reason why he was still alive—the heavy watch case in his vest pocket! He had turned slightly, for the bullet had caromed off.

Even while Eli was fumbling for his .38 in the drawer behind the counter, Quaking Aspen was rocking with gunfire. Eli stiffened, his gun in his hand. He took an uncertain step backward, weaved on rubbery legs. Gradually it needled his confused mind that Cutsinger was robbing the bank.

Somehow he staggered to the street. He stood dazed, swaying a bit, in the ankle-deep dust, staring at a town in turmoil. Batwing doors slammed outward as men rushed forth, aquiver with excitement. Women picked up their skirts and ducked for the nearest coverts.

It seemed to Eli that there were pounding feet in every direction. Some men, attracted by the first shooting, were dashing northward to inquire after Eli's welfare. Others, alarmed by the later shooting at the bank, swarmed to the south end.

"What's happened, Eli?" "You hurt?" "How come all the shootin'?" A half-dozen men asked questions at once.

"Don't mind me, I 'm all right!" Eli told them, waving them off. "Better see about the bank—"

As he pointed a shaky finger, Eli saw Cutsinger backing out of the bank, a block away, .45 flaming. The sack of loot was gripped in his left hand. Cutsinger was two hundred feet ahead of the converging crowd. He vaulted to his saddle and thundered away from town, running a gauntlet of hastily tossed lead. But all real gunfighting protection had vanished when Dan Ordway had been tricked out of town. Cutsinger got away scot-free.

Eli stood there, too far away to do any effective shooting. He snorted an oath as he watched enraged citizens hastily form a posse and go hammering after the bank robber. He listened to the whistle of the pass-bound freight as it roared through Quaking Aspen without stopping.

With a regretful sigh, Eli shuffled back to the sidewalk. He'd have Doc Whitehead look at his heart, to see if any real damage had been done. It took a young hand, anyway, to catch a bank robber.

Suddenly Eli halted. His pulses pounded with a new excitement and he forgot all about needing medical attention. There *was* something he could do! For he, alone, knew the trail Cutsinger would take. Eli had overlooked it in his dazed condition.

Cutsinger would give his pursuers the slip—then he would make for the railroad and Fargo Pass! The posse, perhaps, would breeze for Gary Canyon, the only horseback trail through the Humpbacks to the badlands. Checking the loads in his .38, Eli defiantly ignored his aches as he headed toward the livery stable.

"He's a bad one to track alone, Eli!" Jake Towers, the hostler, warned him. "Shot that there new cashier feller, Tim Rawn, and it don't look like Rawn'll pull through. Cleaned the bank, they say."

"Got to lone-wolf it, Jake!" Eli said tersely. "Everybody else who can fork a saddle is in the posse."

SOME minutes later Eli, astride a roan gelding, pounded south. It was a jarring ride for the old watch repairman, who hadn't been on a fast horse in years.

As he rode, he thought about Punch and the way he had died. And now it had happened to Tim Rawn, the bank's cashier.

He squinted at the sun. About three-thirty. In half an hour the freight train would be puffing upgrade through the pass.

Eli topped a hill and pulled up, swabbing at his sweating face with a red bandana. Below, he could see the wood-burning old six-wheeler, Calamity Jane by name, highballing across the sunny plain toward the foothills. She carried her huge funnel stack haughtily, throwing black smoke over the jerking boxcars. Soon she would slow up on the hairpin curves of the pass.

Then Eli's jaws hardened as he spotted a rider on the trail ahead, cutting toward the train.

The watch repairman gave spur. He pushed the roan up and down a hazardous short cut of sharp gullies and side canyons. Cutsinger was out of sight now, but he was probably aboard the train, primed to effect the slickest getaway in the history of Quaking Aspen. Setting his lips, Eli kept up his reckless clip, thankful he had spent many an idle Sunday leisurely exploring the little known trails of the Humpbacks.

The wind-tossed pines seemed to warn him away from disaster with their needled branches. But Eli crowded the mount through a brush tangle and at last broke out upon the roadbed. He checked rein, staring down the gleaming rails to where old Calamity Jane was laboring painfully up the four-degree grade. Eli glimpsed Wash Gregory, her engineer, sticking his head out the cab. Whereupon the little watch repairman rose in his stirrups, yanked his .38 and sent a couple of shots skyward.

He watched Calamity Jane brake to a jolting stop. She wheezed wearily a moment and settled to dead silence. Grimy-faced Wash Gregory was cursing as he clambered from the cab. Eli rode up, tense, still gripping his gun. At the railroader's heels was his bug-eyed kid fireman, Willie Pile.

"What's the big idea, Eli?" Wash blurted, stomping forward furiously. "Better be damned important, stopping me on this grade—"

"It is," Eli told him breathlessly, hauling up. "You got a killer aboard." He added as the engineer's jaw went slack: "Calls hisself Noe Cutsinger!"

Their faces went pale at mention of the name.

Soot-smeared Willie Pile shoved to the fore, blinking. "What we gonna do? Me and Wash ain't got no guns—"

"Stay out of trouble then!" Eli snapped, straightening in the leather. "You can't fight a gunslick with a scoop shovel, that's sure." With a quick motion of his .38 he waved them back. "Stick to your posts, gents. I got the only gun in the outfit, so I-I'll take over."

He left them then, spurring along the line of cars, looking for Cutsinger. His puny weapon felt clumsy in his nervous hand. For a moment all this seemed unreal. He belonged back in his little shop mending watches, not facing a killer without a plan. He found himself wishing he were years younger and had something larger than a .38.

In a kind of daze Eli saw him—Cutsinger—rising from the still form of the brakeman sprawled in the shadow of the caboose. Cutsinger's lips moved in a curse Eli couldn't hear and the man whirled in Eli's direction, six-gun bucking and roaring in his hand.

Lead cut the air about Eli and his screaming nerves told him it was high time he got out of there and quit doing a lawman's work. Yet he kept riding on, toward the big man, hardly aware that he was emptying his .38 as fast as he could keep crooking his trigger finger.

AT LAST only a dull click answered him and he realized he hadn't hit Cutsinger, who strode slowly toward him, a grin on his face, a cat-after-a-mouse expression. Tossing his empty weapon, Eli tried to smash that smirk right in the middle, but his throw fell far short. It was then, for the first time, that Cutsinger, tired of playing, began shooting to kill.

One shot did it. The bullet tore Eli out

of the saddle before he could neck-rein the roan out of line. Lead that slammed him athwart a steel rail between cars!

Agony stabbed his bleeding left shoulder as he tried to move. He could hear Cutsinger's chilling laugh. Then that sound faded away and Eli heard the killer, evidently regarding his bullet-ridden victim as of no further menace, hasten in the direction of the engine.

When his muscles failed to respond, Eli knew it was the finish. Head down, weak from loss of blood, he just sagged there on the rail and let the blackness roll over him.

A sound penetrated Eli's slipping consciousness like a lance, rousing him to a moment's complete comprehension—the sound of steam being fed to cylinders! He sensed a sinister vibration throughout the train as the big drivers began to grab hold. In a flash Eli got the picture.

Cutsinger, having come upon the engineer and fireman now, was still making good his brag of getting away by rail. At gun point Wash Gregory was being forced to start his engine. Eli was powerless to move. He would be cut to doll rags! Then Eli thought he heard shooting, just as total oblivion swept over him.

Later, when he awoke, Eli would have sworn his brain was playing fancy capers. But when the fog disappeared by jerky stages, he sensed that he was still alive, lying there in the shade of the boxcar, and staring up at the grinning face of Sheriff Dan Ordway. The lawman was squatted on his haunches.

"It's okay, old-timer," Ordway was saying. "Take it easy, and I'll do the talkin'. You're all bandaged up proper, till we can get you to Doc Whitehead. You'll be all right. And Wash says the brakeman is gonna pull through—"

"But Cutsinger?" Eli wanted to know.

"Told you to rest easy!" Ordway's tone was more severe. "I had to kill Cutsinger." He shook his head. "For a little old watch repairman, you sure ain't short none on plain common guts! Credit for gettin' that cuss really belongs to you, Eli."

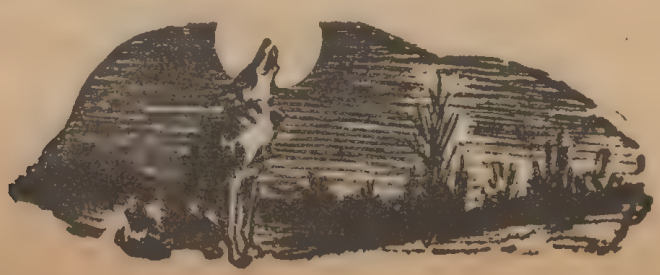
Despite the sheriff, Eli half rose on an elbow. He beamed a little. "You mean the message I give you? I was worried stiff you wouldn't cotton—"

"I shoulda figgered somethin' was wrong," Ordway nodded, grinning faintly, "when you allowed I had the best ticker in town. Cheap old turnip I own only cost me a coupla bucks. Didn't tumble till later, ridin' toward the Humpbacks. Then, by damn, I find I'm totin' 'Old Faithful,' Charley Jade's railroad watch!"

The grin widened and Ordway shoved back his hat, tossed a pebble down the roadbed. "Charley's watch, set at four o'clock, and not runnin' worth a whoop in Hades. I got to thinkin', like you hoped I would, that there was somethin' almighty wrong about me ridin' up Gary Canyon. Figgered, for the first time in thirty years, you'd made a mistake on purpose! *Railroad* watch—four o'clock—the pass! Didn't know why, but I savvied you sure was a-honin' for me to meet this train."

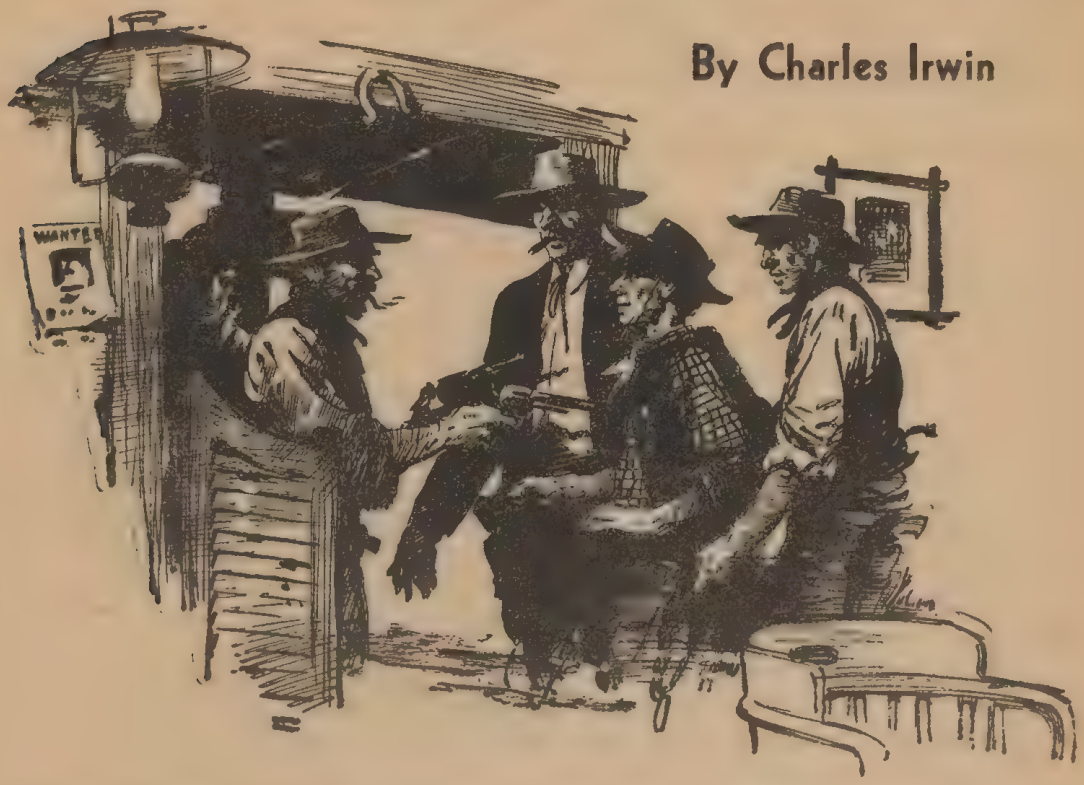
Eli settled back, sighing. "Just in time, too, or Calamity Jane woulda cut me to ribbons. Dan, you—"

"Told you to shut up, didn't I?" Ordway snapped back at him, though his eyes were twinkling. "Right now, I gotta gather up the bank money and concentrate on gettin' you back to town. Folks'll wanta be hearin' all about a scrappy little guy named Eli Pepper!"



Port Town on the Prod

By Charles Irwin



These two vaqueros savvied plenty about cows, but lumber lore was off their range. And when they were paid off in wood instead of dinero for a cattle shipment, they had to think fast and act faster to stave off timber treachery.

CAPTAIN LEBLANC spoke as if his voice carried a perpetual snarl. "Ze mate tally t'ree hunnerd head," he announced. He smiled, although somewhat on the oily side. "I trus' ze count meet wiz ze chevaliers' approval?"

"Oh, shore, shore," Durango Pillsbury agreed. "Three hundred's just what me an' Rip here figgered. Now the price we agreed on was seven dollars a head, cap'n. Let's see, that figgers up to—" Durango paused, shoved his Stetson back on a shaggy head, and scratched.

He turned to his partner. "Rip," he said, "you got a pencil?"

Rip Eaton commenced fumbling in the various pockets of his cowhide vest.

"Ze price," Captain LeBlanc said smoothly, "is twenty-one hunnerd dollars."

This astounding figure instantly brought a pair of broad grins to the tanned faces of Durango and Rip.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Rip yelled. "Durango, we're millionaires!"

"We shore are," Durango agreed happily. He rubbed his hands, then held them out, the palms cupped.

"You can just pay us off in gold, silver, or even currency," he said. "It don't make no difference to me an' Rip, cap'n."

But the captain laughed. "Ze chevaliers," he said, "seem not to unnerstan' zat money zees days ees scarce." He shrugged. "So we make ze trade. Zere," he said, pointing, "ees your pay."

The eyes of Durango and Rip followed the line which his finger directed. Stacked on the wharf were several piles of lumber.

Durango turned back to LeBlanc. "Now, looky here, cap'n," he said. "We don't want no trouble over this. But just what is me an' Rip supposed to do with this bunch of firewood?"

"Ees not firewood," the captain explained. "Ees high-grade Florida lumbair. In Texas you have plenty cattle. In Florida we have plenty lumbair. Eees zis not a fair trade?"

"No, zis ees not a fair trade," Rip Eaton replied, shoving out a stubbled chin. "Look, Frenchy, me an' Durango drove them three hundred head o' Texas longhorn steers over seventy-five miles o' swampland. We ain't in a good mood." He dug the forefinger of his right hand into the palm of his left, in rapid succession. "We crave to get paid in hard cold cash, not—lumbair!"

"Perhaps," Captain LeBlanc suggested blandly, "if ze chevaliers would gaze around, they would change ze mind."

DURANGO and Rip followed this suggestion. They discovered that they were surrounded by some twenty barefoot seamen, their pants rolled up revealing swart, muscular legs. There was not a man of them who didn't carry a knife the size of a meat cleaver. Some of them packed weapons such as blunderbusses and cap and ball pistols. As for Captain LeBlanc, his ample beltline was decorated with a brace of dueling guns.

Durango and Rip each packed a .45 Colt nestled in a low-cut holster which was held in place at the hipline with a well-filled cartridge belt. But they both had sense enough to realize that the numbers were against them.

"Yeah," Rip growled, "I reckon it's a fair enough trade."

"Reckon so," Durango added bitterly.

"*Bien*," the captain smiled. "*Au revoir*, chevaliers." He turned, walked up the gangplank.

His crew followed, with cautious backward glances. Captain LeBlanc began snarling orders in French. In a surprisingly short time, his vessel was free of her moorings. And two crestfallen vaqueros called Durango Pillsbury and Rip Eaton watched her sail out toward the gulf, with a cargo of three hundred bawling longhorn steers.

"What," Rip demanded savagely, "does *chevalier* mean?"

"I dunno," Durango replied with equal animal feeling. "An' I don't give a dang! What I want to know is what we goin' to do with—" He glared ruefully at the lumber. "With this!"

Just then a burly man approached. He looked maybe thirty-five, and carried a long scar from left ear to the point of his chin.

"Hey," he greeted, snapping a thumb toward the general direction of the lumber piles. "Does this junk belong to you hobos?"

"Now, we're hobos," Rip whispered to Durango.

"Yeah," Durango whispered back. "Mebby he's been lookin' at what ain't in our pockets."

He turned to the newcomer. "Why, yessir," he said, rocking from run-down boot heels to battered boot toes. "Nice load o' lumber, hey?"

The burly man looked it over. "Mebby," he grunted without interest. "What you figure to do with it?"

"We ain't quite shore," Durango admitted. He and Rip glanced at each other.

"Would you crave to buy it?" Rip inquired hopefully.

"Nope." This scarred hombre shook his head. "I'm Jake Lawry, and I'm in charge of this here wharf. When you hobos going to move this stuff?"

"Why?" Durango inquired. "Is it in the way?"

"Well, it will be," Lawry told him. "Tell you what I'll do—I'll let you leave it here overnight, if you want. But if it ain't off my wharf by noon tomorrow,

I'll have the whole caboodle heaved in Matagorda Bay."

Abruptly he turned, walked away.

"Cheerful feller," Durango remarked.

"Big, too," Rip added. "Well, Durango, you got any ideas?"

Durango nodded. "I got a worrisome headache, an' a right terrible thirst," he said. "C'mon, Rip, let's mosey into the nearest saloon, meanwhile tryin' to figger somethin' out. There ought to be some jigger in this here town of Indianola which would like to buy a load o' high-grade Florida lumber."

This idea suited Rip.

THE two cowpokes had been employed most recently on a cow spread over in Wilson County. This year, however, had been a lean one. There was little market for Texas beef, and their boss had been forced to strip his crew to skeleton proportions. Durango and Rip, being the two newest men, were among the first to be laid off. Further reason was, they were not altogether reliable, and being in their early twenties, they leaned slightly toward being wild and not too steady.

However, a better team of vaqueros could hardly be produced in the whole State of Texas, if they put their minds to it. Having nothing better to do, they registered a brand, and proceeded to burn it on a few hundred head of longhorn mavericks. They then rounded up as many as they could, turning them toward Matagorda Bay. Leaving the herd bawling on the outskirts of Indianola, they rode into town where they ran afoul of LeBlanc, the sea skipper.

Now, bellied up to a gulfport bar, they commenced figuring, aided by a quart bottle of red-eye. Before they'd managed to get going good, four gun-slung men sauntered into the saloon, the swamp mud still caked upon their boots.

"Oh-oh," Rip whispered. "I plumb forgot about the boys."

"Me too," Durango said quietly.

The barkeep was polishing his glassware. Durango tapped him on the back.

"Hey!" Durango inquired. "You got a back door to this joint?"

The barkeep turned. "Yeah," he said. "But you boys ain't takin' it till you pay me for this quart."

Immediately, Durango slapped down an eagle. Rip grabbed the bottle. The time this took slowed them down.

At the exit, they were confronted by two of the gun-slung men. "Oh, no you don't," one of them said. He didn't look very happy.

Durango and Rip did a right-about-face, headed for the swing-doors up front. But the other two men barred their retreat.

"Trapped!" Rip growled. "Like a couple o' rats!"

"Which is just what you are," one of the newcomers agreed ominously. "You got your pockets filled with Florida dinero, an' now you're tryin' to sneak out before payin' us. We each got wages comin', for trailing them cows o' yours here, an' a fifty-dollar bonus. Or did you boys forget that?"

"Why, Bill!" Durango exclaimed, aghast at such a thought. "Off an' on, we been ridin' with you boys for years. You know we wouldn't try a trick like that!"

"The fact," the man called Bill replied, "that we know you two so well, is what leads us to figger that's just what you *would* try. But you ain't gettin' by with it. C'mon, kick across!"

Hopelessly, Durango and Rip glanced at each other.

"You tell 'em, Rip," Durango suggested.

"How would you boys like to get paid off in some nice Florida lumber?" Rip inquired.

This query was answered by four surprised and very ugly stares.

"I wouldn't trust 'em, fellers," the barkeep put in. "They tried to get away without payin' for that quart."

"Now, how do you like that?" Durango inquired of the world at large.

Rip hastily explained how Captain LeBlanc had tricked them. He vehemently termed it an "act of piracy."

"And," Durango finished, "we'll take you down to the wharf an' show you the lumber to prove it."

AT FIRST, the four trailhands refused to believe this. They laid Durango and Rip on their backs, and searched their pockets. They turned the two young vaqueros upside down, shook them by their boots. All they could find was $2.98. This was promptly confiscated. The bottle of red-eye was, also.

The men took it to the bar and called for four whisky glasses. The barkeep complied.

"Hey!" Rip said, picking his hat up off the floor. "Ain't you fellers goin' to give us none o' that?"

"Haw! Haw!" Bill replied. "You two go on out an' see if you can sell that load o' lumber. We don't care what you get for it, as long as it's enough to pay us off. Also," he continued, "we got your hosses hitched alongside ours. Don't get on 'em—we'll be watchin' you. Now get goin'!"

Durango and Rip considered it wise to obey this order. Outside, Rip's horse nickered at scent of him.

"The man inside," Rip informed his palomino, "says me an' you ain't goin' no place." He walked over and started stroking his pony neck.

"Hey!" Bill yelled from the swing-doors. "That hoss ain't interested in no lumber." He was backed by the other three.

Durango and Rip began their trek along the board sidewalk.

"Look!" Durango said. "There's a new buildin' goin' up." He pointed across the street. "I bet they could use some lumber."

"Shore," Rip agreed.

They hit across the street.

Carpenters were pounding full blast. A tall man, with prematurely white hair, mustache, and goatee, was watching the job from the sidewalk. He had all the bearing of a military officer.

"Hi, Mister,' Durango greeted. "Could you tell us who's building this here barn?"

"I imagine so," the tall man said, without bothering to look at them. "I am."

"Well, now," said Durango, "I reckon you're just the feller we're lookin' for."

"Sorry," Mr. Whitewhiskers told them. "I have all the carpenters I need."

"Oh, it ain't that," Rip put in. "We want to know if you'd like to buy a load o' lumber."

At first, the tall man looked as if he was going to kiss their hands. Then he drew himself up, after looking the two vaqueros over.

"I might possibly be interested," he said. He came out with a silver cigar case, offered a couple of smokes to Durango and Rip.

They were good cigars, and the two boys helped themselves. The other man was already smoking.

"I AM J. Noble Rushington," he announced. "It used to be Colonel J. Noble Rushington. However, you gentlemen may call me simply Mr. Rushington, if you wish."

"Thankee," Rip said gratefully. "Now, about this lumber—"

"Oh, yes," Mr. Rushington interrupted. "You have some, you say. Good—yes, good. You see, this plant which I am building is for the purpose of pickling beef."

"An' you need more lumber," Durango said, impatiently anxious.

"No," said Rushington, "I have plenty to complete the job."

"Oh," Durango grunted, and so did Rip.

"However, I intend building a plant for salting beef at St. Mary's," Rushington continued. "I shall need material for that."

"Oh," both vaqueros breathed, relieved.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Rushington, "suppose we wend our way to view this lumber of yours. Lead on."

Durango and Rip led their prospective buyer to the wharf. Jake Lawry, the burly man with the scar on his face, was looking over the load.

"So you're back," he observed. "Don't forget, tomorrow noon's the deadline." He turned abruptly and walked away.

"How much lumber do we have here?" Mr. Rushington inquired.

"We ain't weighed it," Rip acknowl-

edged, "but I reckon there must be around a million pounds."

For a moment Mr. Rushington appeared deep in thought. Then he said, "Lumber, gentlemen, is not bought and sold by the pound, but by the foot. It would appear that this is very poor grade."

He produced a folding rule from his pocket and proceeded to measure the piles.

"It's poor grade," Durango said to Rip.

"That ain't what the cap'n said," Rip answered.

Having completed his measuring, Mr. Rushington folded the rule and replaced it in his pocket.

Returning, he announced, "You have roughly one hundred thousand feet. How much do you want for it?"

"Twenty-one hundred dollars," Rip replied promptly. That was what they were supposed to have gotten for the cattle.

"Oh, come now," Mr. Rushington ridiculed. "After all, good lumber sells for only ten dollars a thousand. Tell you what I'll do, gentlemen—I'm prepared to pay cash, and I'll give you five hundred dollars for the load."

Durango and Rip went into conference.

"You know anything about lumber?" Rip inquired.

"Nothin'," Durango admitted. "Do you?"

"No," said Rip. "You think we ought to take this ol' coot's offer?"

"Reckon so," Durango decided. "At least we can pay off them trailhands an' keep them off our necks."

"Yeah," Rip agreed. "Them boys can play plumb rough when they want to. But I still think this ol' goat is givin' us a skinnin'."

"Well, we ain't got time to find out," said Durango.

THEY emerged from their huddle.

"It's a deal," Durango smiled. "You just pay us the dinero an' the lumber's yours."

"Not so fast, gentlemen," Mr. Rushington said smoothly. "You see, I have a shipment coming from Florida which was to have been landed at St. Mary's. However, it seems to have been delayed. Now, you cart this load to St. Mary's, and then I will pay you."

Durango's groan was audible as Mr. Rushington walked off the wharf and turned into Indianola's street. Angrily, Rip tossed what was left of his cigar into Matagorda Bay. Durango approached the nearest lumber pile which he caressed with a forceful kick.

"I thought a herd o' wild steers was hard to handle," he growled. "But at least they can move under their own power. How we ever goin' to get this gol-danged stuff to St. Mary's?"

"Seems I noticed a place in town," Rip said thoughtfully, "which rents everything from rowboats to mule teams. Mebby we can do business with the proprietor."

They started. On the way, they spotted their horses hitched beside the four trailhands' mounts in front of a café.

"The boys is in there stuffin' themselves on our $2.98," Durango guessed. "Which reminds my stomach that it's long past suppertime. Let's go in, Rip."

"Yeah," Rip agreed. "Mebby we could get the boys to help us."

Inside, the trailhands were heartily enjoying a steak dinner. Durango and Rip approached their table. Rip told of the deal they'd made and asked for assistance in transferring the lumber.

While his partner was talking, Durango tried to sneak a cut of steak from Bill's plate. He hastily changed his mind. Bill caught him in the act and banged him over the wrist with the flat of a table knife."

"I'm a vaquero, not a sawmill roustabout," Bill then informed them. "I don't know about the other boys, but I ain't breakin' my back loadin' no lumber."

The other three agreed.

"C'mon, Durango," Rip said sourly. "Well have to do it ourselves."

"An' on an empty stomach," said Durango, and favored Bill with a dirty look.

As they reached the rental establish-

ment, a long-legged young man drove up in a buggy. He stopped to let them enter first and smiled in a congenial manner.

"That looks like a right nice feller," Rip remarked.

"Yeah," Durango agreed, "which is more'n I can say for most of them we've run into around here."

The proprietor of the establishment came forward.

"Evenin', young gentlemen," he greeted. "Goin' to do a little night fishin' in a rowboat? Or mebby you wanted a surrey. Goin' courtin', I bet!"

"No," Rip told him, "we want to rent a couple o' wagons an' mule teams."

"Fine—fine," beamed the rent man. "I have just what you need. The cost is only five dollars a day for each one."

The long-legged man in the buggy was driving in.

"Evenin', Mr. Scott," said the proprietor. "Just run 'er in the back there, an' I'll take care of it."

"The price is fair enough," said Rip. "Now I reckon it'll be all right for me an' Durango to pay you when we bring 'em back tomorrow."

"Of course, of course."

DURANGO and Rip grinned at each other. Maybe this thing was going to turn out all right, after all. Their joy was short-lived.

"Naturally," they were told, "I must have a fifty-dollar deposit on each outfit. That'll be a hundred dollars, gentlemen."

"Now, look," Rip began.

Both vaqueros started explaining the fix they were in. The rent man wasn't interested in their troubles.

"Rules are rules," he reminded them.

Just then the long-legged man called Scott approached.

"Excuse me for butting in," he said, "but are you men speaking of the lumber down on the wharf?"

Durango and Rip verified this.

"I was just down looking it over," Scott told them. "I'm sorry to hear you've already sold it."

He paid his rental for the buggy. "Oh, well," he sighed, "I doubt if we'd have been able to strike up a deal, anyhow. Of course you know that lumber of any sort comes at a premium around here, due to the scarcity of timber. And what you have is very fine quality, really better than I need, and certainly worth more than I can afford to pay."

It dawned on the two vaqueros that they'd been getting a series of conflicting opinions concerning their lumber. Scott bid them a good evening, and started for the street.

"You know," said Durango, "I like that feller's talk."

"Me, too," Rip agreed. "C'mon, Durango!"

He yelled, "Hey, Mister!" At the sidewalk, Scott paused, turned. Durango and Rip joined him.

"We ain't completed no deal on that lumber," Rip explained. "What sort o' proposition you got?"

Scott studied them for a moment in silence. He said finally, "I have something in mind which might possibly interest you boys. If you'd care to have dinner with me as my guests, we might talk the matter over."

This invitation to chow was several points in Scott's favor. He took them to the hotel dining room. On the way, introductions were made. The three were soon calling one another by first name. Scott's was Thomas, which Rip and Durango promptly shortened to Tom.

"I'm from Illinois," Tom Scott told them at the table, "where my people have been in the stock business for some time." He smiled. "It would seem that I'm the family black sheep, due to my giving in to a desire to visit certain interesting parts of the world. During this time, however, I've made connections with reliable shipping companies and livestock houses.

"In my opinion," he continued, "the gulf ports have not yet begun to come into their own. It is my idea to build cow pens and loading equipment here, since this port is navigable and handy to the cattle country. In other words, I am all set to go—except for one thing. It must be admitted that I overlooked the fact that building material is ex-

ceptionally scarce. The lumber at hand is very expensive."

"We got the lumber, Tom," Durango said, and shoved in a man-sized hunk of beefsteak.

"Yes," Scott agreed, "you boys hold the key to my prosperity. *Our* prosperity, if you decide to accept my proposition."

"Shoot," Rip invited, around a welcome mouthful of grub.

"I'M GOING to be brief," said Scott, "and I'm not going to try to talk you into it. Simply, I'm in a position to draw from my capital one thousand dollars cash for your lumber. A balance of two thousand will be paid with shares in the business."

"Hey, Durango, we're in business!" Rip exclaimed.

"And your endeavor," Scott concluded, "will be to buy cattle on the plains and drive them to port."

"It's a deal," Durango beamed. "An' we're mighty proud to throw in with you, Tom."

Mr. J. Noble Rushington then approached their table.

"Well, Scott," he boomed, with a pompous chuckle. "How's the livestock shipping going? Haw! Haw! Yes, you young fellows have to get your horns clipped a time or two before you learn!"

Mr. Rushington next eyed Rip, then Durango. "I suppose," he speculated, "that you have arranged to haul that lumber of St. Mary's."

"The deal's off," Rip told him.

"What!" Rushington rumbled. "But you promised—"

"We promised nothin', Mister," said Durango.

Rushington drew himself up. "It's of small matter," he said tersely. "I have this load coming from Florida, anyhow. I was merely trying to help you two—"

"Yeah," said Durango, "by payin' us about a tenth what the lumber's worth."

Rushington ignored this. "Captain LeBlanc will land any day now," he sneered.

"Did you say Captain LeBlanc?" Rip asked.

"I did."

"Wouldn't hold my breath waitin' for him."

Durango and Rip grinned. They related how LeBlanc had traded the lumber for their three hundred head of cattle. Rushington did a great deal of sputtering. At last he calmed himself with an effort.

"I'm not a man to bicker," he announced. "I'll pay two thousand spot cash, and cart the load myself."

"The price o' lumber," Rip remarked, "is goin' up,"

"Three thousand!" Rushington exploded. "Dammit—four thousand!"

The eyes of Durango and Rip glittered. They looked questioningly at Tom Scott who had been listening to the conversation in silence.

"I can't say that I'm not disappointed," he now said quietly. "This is a fine offer, and I'll say nothing to stop you from taking advantage of it."

Durango and Rip went into a whispered conference. The other two men waited. Rushington was pacing impatiently. Finally, Rip looked up.

"J. Noble," he said, "you're interruptin' an important business palaver."

"You mean—" Rushington began.

"We mean," Durango grinned, "in plain ol' Texas lingo—git goin'!"

DURANGO and Rip were two very contented vaqueros that night. Tom Scott had arranged for their hotel room. He had left them with the understanding that first thing in the morning they would arrange to have the lumber hauled to his property. They would then visit a lawyer, where the cash settlement would be made and the company incorporated. Durango and Rip had also looked up their trailhands. With assurance that they'd get paid tomorrow, the trailhands had promised to roll up in their soogans that night and not be troublesome.

"If I ever run into that Captain LeBlanc again," Durango yawned in a comfortable bed, "I'm goin' to shake his hand. Reckon ol' Frenchy don't know what Florida lumber sells for in Texas."

"No," said Rip. "An' we don't know

what Texas steers sell for in Florida, neither."

He rolled over and went to sleep. Everything was fine until the next morning. They rose bright and early for breakfast—at Tom Scott's expense. After eating, Scott went to rent a wagon and team. Rip and Durango walked down to the wharf.

The lumber was gone!

They stared. "What the jumpin' blue blazes!" Rip exclaimed.

"Mebby we got the wrong wharf," Durango suggested.

"Wrong wharf, hell!" Rip snorted. "This here's the only one in Indianola. I've come to figger lumber's about the same around here as gold. Somebody's stole it, Durango!"

He pulled his Colt, checked the loads. Durango did likewise.

"Reckon these jiggers around here figger we're purty ignorant," Rip growled on. "They'll dang soon change their minds. How's your iron, Durango?"

"Ready for work," Durango stated. "That lumber can't be far off. First, let's see what Jake Lawry knows about this."

There was a shack on the wharf, which Lawry used for an office. Durango and Rip went there. Two tough-looking gents gazed at them from across the counter.

"Where's Lawry?" Rip inquired.

One of the men closed a jackknife, replaced it in his pocket. "I dunno," he responded curtly. "We just work here."

"If you see Lawry before we do," said Rip, "tell him we got words with him."

After they'd walked outside, Durango said, "Hey, Rip, wasn't that jigger pickin' a splinter out of his hand with that jackknife?"

"Uh-huh," Rip grunted. "He works for Lawry, so Lawry's the hombre we want to see."

SHOOTING off the wharf were some freshly rutted wagon tracks. The tracks curved into town, then mingled with other tracks, and lost themselves. Durango and Rip followed, nevertheless.

Tom Scott was driving a team and draw wagon from the rental establishment when he heard the thunder of six-gun fire from somewhere along the street. He clicked up the mules, headed toward the sound.

A minute later he saw the door of a big barn swing open. First, Mr. J. Noble Rushington came marching out, his hands sky-high. Jake Lawry followed, in a like position. Then came Durango and Rip, their guns peeled.

"What in the world's coming off here?" Scott called down.

Rip turned, looked up at him. "Hi, Tom," he grinned. "Looks like J. Noble here hired Lawry an' his men to hijack our lumber. Me an' Durango went snoopin' in every barn along the way before we found 'em. The lumber's inside.

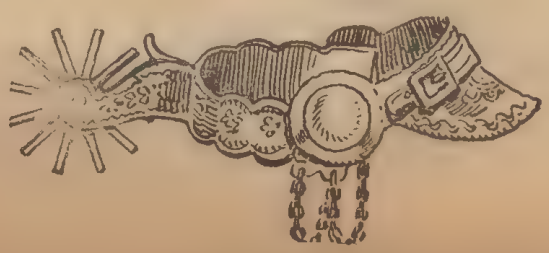
"Wasn't hard to get 'em talkin'. Of course Lawry pulled a gun, an' Durango had to crease his arm. Then I had to take this here li'l derringer away from J. Noble."

And Durango inquired, "They got a sheriff around here, Tom, or a town marshal, or somethin'? We'd shore crave to deposit these skunks where they belong."

"They sure have," Scott told them. "Right back toward the other end of the street."

He watched Durango and Rip head their captives past the wagon. Scott leaned over.

"Looks like I picked a couple of mighty fine partners," he said. "Don't you think so, Mr. Rushington?"



Hell's Rangers

Some exciting exploits in the lives of the West's famous law-riders.

By Nat W. McKelvey

GRINNING slyly, the Devil, according to an old poem, created Arizona for his private range. He sprinkled it with deserts, blasted it with Hell's own heat, and studded it with raw, unfriendly cacti.

Law, on this Devil's frontier, was a thing to be flouted. Rustlers and train robbers like Wild Bill, the Smith brothers, Climax Jim, Jack Pitkin and Bill Johnson ran roughshod over Satan's acres, terrorizing honest folk while Old Nick laughed.

By 1900, killing, theft, rustling, and arson became so prevalent that righteous men screamed for relief. Cattlemen organized, and the territorial legislature and Governor N. Oakes Murphy produced a law establishing the Arizona Rangers. Fearlessly, this group rode the Devil's range, earning the nickname, "Hell's Rangers."

Burton C. Mossman captained the first group, a body of twelve hardened men. Each ranger had a speaking knowledge of Spanish, had been a cowhand or cattleman for at least eight years, owned one or more good horses and a pack mule, was a first-rate trailer and could trigger a Colt with speed and accuracy.

Everything that his men were or could do, Mossman could do better. At his peak, he was unsurpassed as a gunslick, a talent he acquired while range foreman for the gigantic Aztec Land and Cattle Company, the famous Hashknife, of Holbrook.

"With a fearlessness seldom equaled in Western history," writes Earle R. Forrest, historian, "Mossman carried the law into the desert and mesquite so thoroughly that he won the admiration and respect of all honest men. . . ."

During his nearly two years of service with the rangers, Mossman engineered the breaking up of countless rustler bands, sending their members to the penitentiary at old Fort Yuma. Today, Burton Mossman is a New Mexico cattle king.

But small cow spreads still had rustler trouble. The stock thieves would steal entire horse remudas, making it impossible for the little outfits to undertake their beef and calf roundups. Obligingly, of course, the rustlers would step in and make the gathers themselves.

Tom H. Ryning now captained Hell's Rangers. To combat the spreading lawlessness, he secured a force of twenty-five men, plus a lieutenant and four sergeants.

Joseph Pearce of Eager, Arizona, today vividly recalls Ryning, having served under him as Badge No. 13. Ryning, an exceptionally tall men, planned his campaign against rustlers while pacing the long adobe room of his headquarters at Douglas. A fat black cigar bobbed from one corner of his thin strong mouth to the other. His dark eyes flashed and his hips swung with the agile looseness of a jungle cat.

Under Ryning, rangers roamed the saloons and gambling dens of the border country, relieving badmen of their shootin' irons, knives, and blackjacks. The guns the rangers sold to Mexican *Rurales* who, often as not, sold them back to their

original owners. Sooner or later, these hard hombres again lost them to Ryning's men. Through this little game, ranger revenue was assured.

UNUSUAL incidents were usual in a ranger's life. Once, while casing a saloon, Ryning was startled by wild shooting in the street. Before he could move to the batwings to investigate, the flimsy shutters burst open.

"Look out!" From somewhere came a raucous warning, too late.

Wild-eyed, nostrils dilated, mane flying, a huge frightened mare, followed by her terrified colt, ripped the saloon doors from their hinges. Men at the bar dived for cover. Tables flew everywhere. Gaming boards spilled their chips, cards, and apparatus to the floor. From the front door, the mare galloped straight for the nearest back exit, disappearing through it into the night.

Unable to locate the drunken shooter who started the ruckus, Ryning had to forego an arrest. After all, the mare was an innocent victim and anyway the jail did not have stalls.

In 1907, Ryning resigned his job with the rangers to take over as first warden of the new territorial prison at Florence. Here he saved the territory thousands of dollars by building the institution with prison labor. He later served as deputy U. S. marshal in San Diego. In July, 1943, he rode off this earthly range, joining other great lawmen who had gone before.

Hell's Rangers were anything but glamor boys, especially under their third and last captain, Harry C. Wheeler. He assigned single men the dangerous, unheralded task of rustler espionage. Garbed in ragged denims, run-down boots, and tattered check shirts, these agents would spend weeks in the hills and open ranges, fraternizing with rustlers, drinking with them, working with them.

Suddenly, on the plea that they urgently needed a new outfit to replace their obviously worn ones, the espionage rangers would jig to the nearest town. Here they would join a ranger band which returned to the rustlers' hangout, usually in time to sweep them up with stolen stock, illegal running irons, and maybe even the loot from a train robbery.

"Wheeler," Joe Pearce recalls, "was a real gunman. Every man in the company respected him."

It was Harry Wheeler who mopped up after the famous shooting in 1906 in which Jack the Ripper, tender at Fisher's Saloon in Benson, got himself well ventilated by lead from a gun new to the frontier, the repeating Luger.

Harry really didn't have much to do with this affair. He just happened to arrive in time for the inquest, twenty seconds after the shooting. His investigation showed that Jack the Ripper, annoyed with the stinginess of his boss, and full of red-eye courage, had whipped out a Colt and shot out the saloon lights. He then plopped a slug into Fisher's thigh.

This was too much for Jesse Fisher. In the semidark, he whammed away at his assailant. When quiet and light again ruled, Jack the Ripper lay slumped over the bar.

"It was the nicest shooting in the dark I ever saw," Harry Wheeler reported. "Six Luger slugs entered Jack's chest, and you could cover the spot with a silver dollar."

When the inquest showed that the dead man was the aggressor and Fisher had merely acted in self-defense, Wheeler released him.

Wheeler himself took part in many a shooting. In 1905, he walked into the Palace Saloon at Tucson, in time to see a stickup man at work. Wheeler fired and the robber fired. Wheeler didn't miss. They carted the dead thief out, feet first.

IN BENSON on February 28, 1907, Wheeler strolled the main street, minding his own business. In front of him he noticed a lone man, J. A. Tracy. Ahead of Tracy, walking rapidly, were D. W. Silverton and his wife.

Suddenly, Tracy began to rage and threaten.

"You dirty skunk," he yelled. "You yellow-livered, wife-stealing coyote. I'm goin' to kill you—both of you!"

From his shirt, Tracy pulled a six-gun,

clawing back the hammer. For an instant, he waved the iron in the air, then slowly, still walking, began to throw down on Silverton and his wife.

Wheeler, his own gun in hand, cried out: "Drop it, Tracy, or I'll gut-shoot you!"

Instead of obeying, Tracy whirled, firing rapidly. Wheeler winced as a heavy slug tore into his foot, a second into his thigh. Calmly, grunting back his pain, the ranger fired four shots. Like an over-ridden bronc, Tracy folded. But the fight was not yet out of him. From the ground, he tried another shot at Wheeler. But the lawman wrenched the gun from Tracy's hand before the trigger could throw the hammer.

They loaded Tracy in a baggage car, heading him toward Tucson for medical attention. He died five miles west of Benson at Mescal.

With his last breath, he gasped: "There's a woman in the case."

Wheeler's investigation developed the fact that Tracy claimed he had married Mrs. Silverton in Nevada. Shortly, his new wife informed him that their marriage had been illegal, that she was already married to Silverton. Hence the shooting.

Ranger Wheeler's last, and possibly greatest effort, from a publicity viewpoint, involved a miners' strike at Bisbee in 1917. The nation was at war, copper badly needed, and a group of agitators talked fifteen thousand miners into a strike.

Wheeler, no longer a ranger but sheriff of the county, deputized two thousand armed men. Quickly, this huge posse rounded up 1187 agitators, put them aboard a train for New Mexico. In the small border town of Hermanas, they were turned loose.

Wheeler was charged with kidnaping, but in the face of his popularity, the county attorney deemed it wise to withdraw the indictment.

One of Wheeler's friends, the late Lorenzo D. Walters, himself a peace officer, wrote of his comrade:

> Captain Harry Wheeler died in Douglas in December, 1925, leaving a wife and young son, also a host of warm friends who will miss his presence. He was one of the "little big men" who played a large part in shaping the destiny of the State of Arizona.

Under the direction of Wheeler, Ryning and Mossman, Hell's Rangers became a real force on the Arizona frontier. In eight years, until they were disbanded, they were responsible for the conviction of more than four hundred cattle and horse thieves.

During its entire life, the ranger organization had no more than ninety-three members. What it lacked in quantity, it made up in quality. Many of its troopers had served under Teddy Roosevelt in the famous Rough Riders.

Thirteen of these ex-rangers are living today. Rightfully, they are proud of the part they played in wresting from the Devil the land that he had created solely for himself. They rode Hell's Range and won.

Exciting Rustler Novelette

Though Ross Ledlie won his cattle fair, he didn't know he'd also fallen heir to a rustler brand—until the day hijackers fired the opening shot in a running-iron race to a shooting-iron showdown.

CHAPTER I

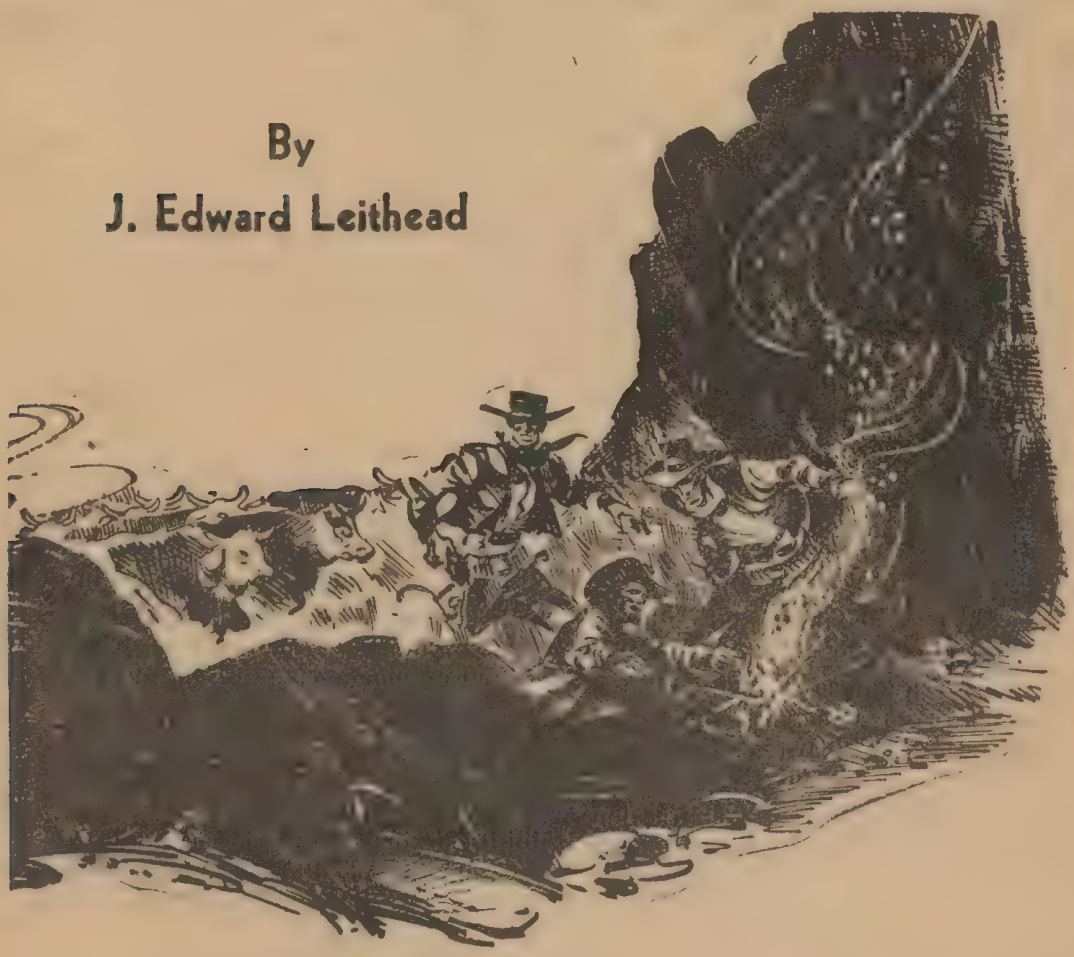
STANDING before the Saddleman's Saloon, Ross Ledlie carried a match in cupped hands to his freshly rolled quirly. He turned, lips emitting a stream of smoke, at the dust-dulled echo of hoofs. Up the long main street of Soapweed came two riders, leaning against the wind. Ledlie's gray eyes narrowed in his darkly tanned face, tension gripped his attenuated figure, clad for brush riding.

It wasn't just lately that the sight of Owen Briscoe, the horseman on the left, had affected Ledlie this way. They had grown up together on the Pinto Mesa range, and, even as boys, had no liking for each other. That natural aversion had been intensified when old Rufe Chilton moved in with a big outfit, bringing a handsome daughter. Ross and Owen had both fallen for her. Though Ledlie had gone to work for Chilton, it seemed that Briscoe had the best chance of winning Irene Chilton.

Brand-Blotters' Rodeo

By

J. Edward Leithead



Owen ran the Drag B, did a thriving business in cattle. Ross was just a top-hand, with no cows of his own. No man drawing a cowboy's wages could reasonably expect Irene to accept him in preference to one who had the security of a ranch and range to offer. Ledlie had started saving his money, a little late, perhaps, but hopefully. If Irene would wait a year or two, he had a chance. But every time he met Briscoe, a frequent visitor at Chilton's Cinch Ring, he felt that chance was growing slimmer.

Briscoe and his foreman, McComb, reined up at the saloon tie-rail, Owen's greeting ringing out with a false heartiness, "Howdy, Ross, not workin' today?" He stepped down from the saddle, not so tall or lean as Ledlie, with the same sly eyes he had as a boy, always in a scrape, always getting out of it with his glib tongue. Now that he was a successful cowman, most people had forgotten how troublesome he had been.

"Howdy, Owen," returned Ledlie. "Had some errands to do for the boss, rode in with Irene and her mother, who're on a buyin' spree."

Briscoe, trailed by the glum McComb, crossed the sidewalk. "Not a bride's outfit they're after, is it?" he said banteringly. "I ain't popped the question to Irene. Not just yet."

Eyes steady on Owen, Ross said, "Pretty sure you'll be the man, eh?"

At that moment, women's voices diverted their attention. Irene Chilton and her mother came down the sidewalk from

Blake's Emporium. Behind them, a clerk emerged from the store, carrying bundles to the buckboard at the curb. A tall and slender girl, dark-haired Irene looked even taller beside her stout, fortyish mother. Mrs. Chilton had the warmest of smiles for Owen Briscoe as he swept off his hat. She did not favor a forty-dollar hand as a son-in-law, scorned Ledlie's ambition to be a brand owner.

"If he'd had it in him," she'd told her husband, "he'd have started years ago. Look at Owen. They both had the same chance, I'll warrant. But Owen's got himself a ranch, an army beef contract that'll make him rich, while Ross is still punchin' another man's cattle."

"I'm just in ahead of a bunch of whitefaces I'm takin' to Fort Arrowhead," Briscoe said to mother and daughter. "We have to lay over one night before drivin' west. You ladies stayin' in town?"

"We're through shopping and going to visit the Learys," said Mrs. Chilton. She laid an unsmiling glance on Ledlie. "Ross, if you want to go home, we won't need you. Leave the buckboard at the livery stable."

Ross met Irene's eye. Her expression said plainly that she'd enjoy the ride back much better if he were along. He said, "I'll hang around, Mrs. Chilton."

"Glad to do a bit of loafing, no doubt!" she sniffed.

"Mother!" exclaimed Irene. "You know there isn't anyone at the Cinch Ring who works harder. See you later, Ross."

AS THE Chiltons passed on, the eyes of the young men followed the girl. Briscoe broke the silence, "You're shootin' too high for a hired hand, Ross."

Ledlie held his temper. "Won't always be one, Owen. Savin' my money."

"By the time you have enough for that herd, she may be Mrs. Briscoe."

Ledlie said, "Don't be too sure."

"If I was that much in love with a girl, and time was against me," said Briscoe, "I'd go out in the brush with a long loop and gather a herd."

Ross looked at him frostily. "There's that difference between us, then. I wouldn't. You know, Owen, I never could understand how you made your beginnin'. There was the time the Haskell boys and Sid Sawney were sent up for rustlin'. You ran around with them, and I expected you'd go to jail, too, but—"

"I wasn't concerned in that cattle liftin'!" Briscoe's eyes flared, but only for an instant. "Ross, how much have you put aside?"

Ledlie answered cautiously, "Why?"

"I'm a sport, Ross. I've some time to kill and I'll play you some poker. Might be you can take me for enough to set yourself up in the cow business. That'd put us on an equal footin' in courting Irene. And I'll show you I hold the winnin' hand with her, even then. Got your money handy?"

Whether Briscoe was prompted by self-conceit or uneasiness regarding his own chances if Ledlie's savings were sufficient to purchase a herd of breeders in the near future, Ross didn't know. He was sure Owen hadn't made the proposal in a spirit of sportsmanship; he would cheat to win if he could get away with it. But Ross thought himself sharp enough to detect any trickery. It would be a satisfaction just to beat Briscoe, and the possibility of increasing the sum laid away was alluring. Ledlie patted his middle, saying:

"I've got it here in a money belt. I'll go you, Owen."

"It may turn out I'm doin' you a big favor," said Briscoe, with a twisted smile, hooking an arm through Ledlie's and hitting the batwings. McComb spat an amber stream at the planks, hitched up his gunbelt, and followed them.

Briscoe called for drinks, chips, and a new deck of cards as they sat down at a table. He grinned as the deal fell to him, but his lips had settled into a grim line at the end of an hour. The chips had steadily piled up at Ledlie's elbow. With the cowhand's cold eyes watching his every move, Briscoe hadn't been able to reverse the luck that was running against him by skillful manipulation of the pasteboards. Ross was sweeping the last of Owen's chips to his side of the table when the Drag B boss, fumbling in a coat pocket, said:

"I'm clean of cash, but there's a herd of two hundred and fifty Herefords down the road, worth six thousand dollars." Drawing forth an old envelope and a pencil, he began to write. "This is a transfer of right and title in them cows, Ross. I'll take chips for that amount."

Ross's lowered lids masked the gleam in his eyes as the chips were counted out. McComb, with an amazed look on his face, leaned toward his boss to ask:

"You know what you're doin'? Had too much firewater?"

"I'm not drunk, Mac. Shut up!"

WHEN Ledlie rose from the table, he had the cattle transfer in his pocket and a hatful of money. He looked at Briscoe slumped in his chair; threw a sidelong glance at McComb to see if he were afflicted with an itching trigger-finger. Both Drag B men glared back at him. For a moment the tense silence held. Spectators broke away on all sides.

"I reckon," said Ledlie, "you'll have to gather another herd to take to Arrowhead, Owen."

Briscoe forced an answer through tight lips. "Not time enough."

"So," said Ross, his mind racing, "you forfeit the contract if they're not delivered by a certain date?" At Owen's nod, he went on, "Looks like a chance to get myself that army contract if I drive the stock there. I'd have plenty to buy more cattle. Maybe I should thank you, Owen, but I figure you came in with the idea of skinnin' me. It didn't work."

He waited for them to make a motion toward their guns. But Briscoe remained slumped at the table, and McComb stood stiffly beside his chair.

"I'll be down to get the cattle soon as I can pick up some helpers," Ledlie said and turned on his heel.

Ross headed for the Leary dwelling, wishing Irene Chilton to be the first to hear of his good luck. It was near sundown. The girl and her mother were on the porch, taking leave of the Learys, when Ledlie strode up. As he excitedly stammered out his news, Irene's face brightened, but Mrs. Chilton gave no sign that she was pleased.

"It's a shame," she declared, "that Owen should lose so many cattle in a game of cards. And that contract, if you get it—well, it seems like taking a mean advantage."

Irene flushed. "How you talk, Mother! Owen challenged Ross to play. If Ross had lost his money, would Owen have taken pity on him and given it back? No! I've heard Dad say he'd give his right arm for that contract."

Her stout defense of him showed Ross how the wind blew, favorably for a young cowhand about to join the ranks of the brand owners. His enthusiasm spilled over. "When I come back from sellin' the herd, Irene, I'll see your father about takin' up the grass lease adjoinin' his range. It expires next month. He don't really need it and always said, if an' when I got a herd together, he'd let me have that piece of range. I'll buy a bunch of breedin' stock—"

"You'd best look elsewhere for grazing land," Mrs. Chilton broke in. "Rufe needs all the range he's got. He never thought you'd own a single critter when he said that. And you wouldn't, only for the way you did get 'em. I haven't much use for gamblers."

Ross grinned. "That must go for Owen, too, Mrs. Chilton." But he knew the old lady would oppose his securing the grass lease, that there were times when old Rufe wasn't head man in his own house.

"Sure," said Mrs. Leary, smiling at Ledlie, "I see no reason for throwin' down on Ross that way. I've known him and Owen since they were kids. I never took no stock in young Briscoe. He's foxy, that one. If men will gamble, somebody's got to lose."

Ledlie walked with Irene and her mother to the buckboard. "I won't have time to go to the ranch before headin' out with the herd," he told the girl as she unwrapped the reins from the whip-socket. "Got to find a couple of stockhands somewhere. I don't like to quit your father on such short notice, but I reckon he'll understand."

"And be cheering for you," Irene answered with a smile. "Good luck on the trail, Ross." Her mother said nothing as

the team kicked up dust and the buckboard rolled away.

Three horsemen had passed the wagon while Ledlie stood talking to Irene. But it was nearly dark, and he hadn't noticed them particularly. As he started down the sidewalk, the riders were tying up at the Saddleman's rack. Ross came face to face with them in the light flooding from the saloon. Clad in worn range clothes, they looked rather pale for men of the open. Yet there was something familiar about the trio.

"Don't you know us, Ross?" said a tall fellow, whose hair needed cutting.

"Greg Haskell!" exclaimed Ledlie, his hand going out. "And Jud Haskell." He turned to the other tall man, then gripped the hand of the shortest one. "And Sid Sawney. It's been nearly five years, ain't it?"

Greg Haskell nodded. "Got time off for good behavior. Had to come and look the old neighborhood over. Been down the range, tryin' to get work. Seems nobody wants to hire ex-rustlers. Have a drink with us before we pull our freight, Ross. You always were a good kid." Greg's eyes narrowed slightly, "Owen Briscoe still around?"

"He is, and doin' fine, though I just won a herd of whitefaces off him in a poker game. Tell you about it." Ledlie was thinking, as he talked, watching the intent faces which the sun had not yet ridden of prison pallor, that it was a fortunate meeting. As a boy he had played with the Haskell brothers and Sawney, and liked them. They had paid their debt to society, probably would never repeat their offense.

"How'd you three like to work for me?" he asked.

CHAPTER II

WITH wide grins, the Haskells and Sawney said that Ledlie had hired some hands. After a trip to the bar, the four hit leather and struck down the road south of Soapweed. Ross knew where the Drag B outfit usually camped overnight when making a beef delivery to Fort Arrowhead. Within a short time, the red glow of a campfire showed on the black prairie and the lowing of cattle drifted upwind.

Greg Haskell, riding knee to knee with Ledlie, said, "The shock of seein' us after all these years might have upset Owen to the point of goin' for iron. You don't want to be mixed up in no shootin' just as you've got a tail-holt on big business. Hold off while us three ride up to that fire and renew acquaintance with Owen."

Ledlie hipped in the saddle. "Look here, Greg. Was Owen one of the gang at the time you fellows were caught, and did he slide out of it somehow?"

"If he was," returned Haskell, "it wouldn't do no good now to say so. We appreciate your hirin' us, Ross, and want to help you build up an outfit. If there's goin' to be trouble, we won't drag you into it. Give us ten minutes. If you don't hear no fireworks, it'll be okay to ride in.'

Ledlie slowed his mount. Perhaps he'd made a mistake in taking up with these ex-rustlers. But he had felt sorry for them, believed they should be given a chance to rehabilitate themselves. Besides, footloose cowhands were scarce on Pinto Mesa range. He had to work fast with any men he could get to land that army post contract. "All right, Greg," he said. "But don't get into a fight if you can sidestep it."

He watched them clatter on toward the camp, saw men rise hastily, silhouetted against the flames. Not far from the fire stood the chuck wagon, with tailgate lowered. Walking his horse, Ledlie strained his eyes to catch a hostile movement as the three riders crossed the rim of firelight and slid to earth. He could make out the figure of Owen Briscoe, facing them, flanked by his cowhands. Owen's sharp outcry was borne on the wind:

"You gallows-birds back?"

Greg Haskell cracked out, "Look who's callin' us gallows-birds, boys! You think we should 'a' been hung, Owen?"

"Would've been better!" Briscoe rapped back.

"For you, maybe, not for us," Greg Haskell said. "We're here to inform you we are now back in circulation, embarkin' on an honest venture with the squar-

est feller on Pinto Mesa range—Ross Ledlie. If it wasn't for avoidin' trouble on his account, we'd have looked you up with different intentions."

"Ledlie!" spat Briscoe. "You mean he's hired you to drive this herd to the fort? I was waitin' to see him. Where's he at?"

"He'll be along presently," said Greg.

Ross had been wondering that Briscoe, plainly agitated over the unexpected return of the Haskells and Sawney, refrained from jerking a gun. He had men enough to cope with the ex-rustlers. But, as Ledlie drew nearer the fire and the wagon, he saw that Greg and Jud and Sid each had a six-shooter bared, covering the Drag B outfit. The ex-waddies must have drawn the weapons as they stepped from the saddle.

Almost in the same instant, Ross heard a scraping sound, too low to reach the men at the fire. He jerked his head. The dim bulk of a man showed at the back of the wagon, leaning out, one arm extended in the direction of the firelighted figures. Apparently he hadn't heard the nearing horseman, the soft earth deadening the clop of hoofs.

Ross swept hand to gun. As he triggered, a shot blasted from the weapon trained on the campfire group. The man in the wagon swung about, gripping the sideboard with his left hand. His Colt flamed, aimed at the shadowy rider. Ledlie was thumbing hammer as the lead whistled by. The half-scream that echoed his second shot identified the human target as McComb. He spilled out of the chuck wagon and lay twitching on the ground. All movement had ceased before Ross kicked his horse toward the fire, replacing the empty shells in his .45.

THE Drag B men still stood in frozen attitudes under the rock-steady pistols of the ex-rustlers. Only their eyes moved as Ledlie pulled up in the firelight. Greg Haskell, without shifting his attension, said:

"Who was the gent that chipped my hatbrim a minute ago? Hope you nailed him, Ross."

"I spotted lead on him just as he fired, but it took another bullet to finish him," replied Ledlie. His cold eyes were fixed on Briscoe. "A lucky thing I didn't ride in with you fellows. That hombre was Owen's foreman, McComb, hid in the wagon to burn me down when I came for the cattle, I suspect. Started to work on you others while he had the chance, Owen, I should've known you wouldn't let that herd go without a last try to hold it—and the contract. You always played dirty."

Briscoe growled, "You can get away with that talk while these jailbirds are coverin' us, Ross. But it's a lie that Mac was bushed up in the wagon. He had an overdose of valley tan and crawled in there to sleep. Seein' strangers holdin' guns on us, he naturally opened up on 'em."

"I ain't convinced, Owen. What you goin' to do about it?"

"Mac's dead, nothin' I can do now. Take your dang cattle, and I hope they stampede on you and pile up in a cutbank!"

"I guess they don't want to smoke us up, boys," Ledlie said to his hands. "Let 'em get their broncs. Say, Owen, we could use that wagon. What'll you take for it, includin' the team and the provisions?"

Briscoe named a price. When Ledlie dismounted to unstrap his money belt, the Drag B boss sneered, "Ain't you afraid to flash that dough in front of the Haskells and Sawney? Wouldn't surprise me if they drygulched you on the road to the fort, grabbin' cash and cattle."

"I'd sooner trust them than you, Owen," said Ross. "Here's your money. Pick up McComb and head out."

The Haskell brothers and Sawney didn't sheathe their guns until the Drag B men were mounted, with McComb's body tied on his horse. They loped away southward. Shortly after they were out of sight, Sawney threw leg over saddle and vanished in the same direction. He returned in about twenty minutes, reporting that Briscoe and his men had kept going in a straight line.

"Reckon they ain't goin' to bother us no more," said Sid. "Does Briscoe really own a ranch, Ross?"

Ledlie nodded. "He bought out old man Harker some time ago. Don't know where he got the money. We won't be able to look that herd over till mornin', so two of you spread your blankets while the others ride herd."

The cattle revealed in the light of a rose-hued dawn were a prime-looking lot of Herefords. Greg Haskell and Sawney had taken the last guard trick. As the stock paraded to the adjacent creek, Haskell reined up beside Sawney, pushing back his battered hat.

"I can't figure Owen gettin' anything the honest way, Sid," said Greg. "Them brands look okay, but I'm wonderin' if—" He broke off to glance campward, where Ledlie and Jud Haskell still slumbered. "There's just time to rope a critter and feel out the brand."

Sawney nodded, reached for his rope. They closed in on a big Hereford, stretched it flat on the prairie. With the horses braced on the whale-lines, Greg hit the ground. As his blunt fingers passed over the Drag B burn on the upturned flank, he felt the ridged flesh of a former branding through the hair. He looked up at Sawney, nodding.

"Worked brand, Sid. A neat job, the kind we used to do."

"Think we ought to tell Ross, Greg?"

Haskell scrubbed his chin. "I'd like to send Owen where we was, on this evidence. But we've got to think of Ross first. He is so danged honest, he'd turn the herd over to the sheriff, kill his chance of ever gettin' that contract. Them army fellers evidently don't know what kind of cattle Briscoe's been sellin' 'em. I'd say take a chance and tell Ross nothin'."

"I say the same, Greg. Let this bellerin' critter up before it wakes 'em."

Loosening the ropes, Haskell jumped for his horse. The Hereford heaved to its feet and joined the watering herd.

WITHIN the hour, Ledlie's outfit had eaten and lined the cattle out for the march. Sawney drove the grub wagon, with his saddler hitched behind. Ross had given the herd only a cursory inspection. Although he distrusted Briscoe, the fact that the latter had been delivering beef on the hoof to Fort Arrowhead regularly for several months, lulled any suspicion that the herd he had acquired over a poker table wore blotted brands. It was such skillful work that no cowman could have discovered the rebranding just by looking. Ross knew Harker had owned a good-sized bunch when Briscoe bought him out.

As Ledlie pointed the herd past Soapweed, Sheriff Bigelow, a heavyset, moon-faced man with burnsides, topped a horse and rode out. He bent a hard look on the two swing riders and the man tooling the wagon.

"So you waddies are back on the old stampin' ground, eh?" he growled at Greg Haskell, the rider nearest him.

Greg grinned. "Seems I oughta remember you, star-packer. Oh, yeah, you're the jaybird that sent us up. Still cumberin' the sheriff's bailiwick, huh? We're honest boys now and aim to stay that way."

"You'd better!" snorted the sheriff, and prodded his mount to catch up with Ledlie. "Makin' a poor beginnin', Ross, hirin' ex-convicts to ride for you."

"Expect 'em to starve, just because they made one misstep, Bigelow?" Ledlie replied a little heatedly. "They paid for it. I figure they ought to have all the help we can give them to keep straight."

"Well," said Bigelow sourly, "I'll have an eye on your outfit."

At camp that night, on a prairie stream, Greg Haskell referred to the sheriff's unfriendly attitude. "That's the way everybody will act toward you, Ross. We're mighty grateful for the jobs, but maybe we better cut our string before we give you a bad name."

"Forget it." Ledlie's smiling glance touched Greg, Jud and Sid as they stood soberly about the fire. "What other folks say goes in one ear and out the other. I know you fellows will make good."

It was a four-day drive to the army post. As the sun was westering on the third day, the outfit was traversing a hilly region, seeking water before throwing off the trail. The sun had vanished when, through a break in the range ahead, Ledlie glimpsed cottonwoods fringing a

waterhole. That the cattle smelled it was apparent from their bawling and increased pace. Ross pulled to one side of the trail, against a hill, as they broke into a run. No use trying to stop a thirsty herd that smelled water.

The red backs flowed past him and dust stung his nostrils. The sibilant hiss of a rope, shooting toward him from the hillside, was drowned in the herd noises. But, as the snaky loop dropped in front of his eyes, he flung up his right arm. The coil snapped tight across his neck and under his left arm. Pried from the saddle by a vigorous wrench on the line, his free hand palmed gunstock as he slammed down at the foot of the slope.

Ross saw numerous faces above him, none of them familiar. The man at the other end of the lariat was a blocky fellow with gray-tinged goatee and scintillant blue eyes. He had the rope braced over a boulder, ducked behind the rock as a bullet sped upward. Seeing another of the party stab hand to gun, Ledlie shifted aim fast. At the roar of his Colt, the man slipped on the crumbling earth. He started riding the hill on the seat of his pants, fiery streaks bursting from the dust raised by his rapid descent. Halfway down, his Colt ceased bucking, for Ross had shot him in a vital spot.

CHAPTER III

LEDLIE was given no chance for further triggering. Strong hands on the rope cutting into his neck and armpit jerked him headfirst against the gravelly slope. He could hear the last of the cattle going by, the yells of his men as they discovered his plight. Shots cracked out from trail and hillside.

Ross, dragged violently up the face of the slope, clung to the gun in his right hand, tried to grab rocky knobs with his left. But his head struck a protuberance and, half dazed, hat and Colt gone, eyes and mouth full of gritty earth, he arrived at the hillcrest. His captors pulled him to his feet, faced him about, the man with the goatee roaring:

"We've got your boss, cowpokes! Up to you whether he dies or not!"

The shooting had stopped. Dimly, Ross made out the Haskells and Sawney at the foot of the hill, eager to come to his aid but restrained by the raider's threat.

"You hombres after them cattle?" barked Greg Haskell.

"That's what!" came the answer. "Shuck your hardware, while my men tie you up, and we'll let it go at that. Fight, and we'll kill the bunch of you, get the herd anyway."

Ross twisted his head around. "Owen Briscoe put you up to this?"

"Never heard of him," retorted the man with the goatee. "Better tell your men to do like I say before I change my mind."

"Safer all around to shoot 'em, Ridott," growled another raider.

But Ridott, having lost one man, evidently was not inclined to shoot it out with Ledlie's cowmands if he could dispose of them an easier way. "All we want is the cows," he repeated impatiently. "Hurry up, Ledlie."

"You know me, eh?" said Ross. It enraged him to lose that herd, but he saw no other way out of the present difficulty. Ridott's gang could hold the hill against his small outfit, and he'd be the first to stop a bullet. There was a possibility they could free themselves afterward and overtake the rustlers. He called out:

"They've got us on the hip, boys. Only one thing to do."

Greg Haskell nodded glumly, all three tossed their guns on the ground. While Ridott kept a gun jammed in Ledlie's back, the rest of the gang went down the hillside, holding .45's on the trio at the base.

SOMETIME later, Ledlie and his hands lay looking up at the stars while hoofbeats receded from the hill. The Ridott gang had stampeded their horses, including the wagon team, but left the wagon. The leader, as he mounted one of the broncs concealed in a thicket, had remarked:

"Ain't much traffic through these hills. I doubt anybody'll be along soon to turn you fellers loose. Starvin's a slow death.

Maybe you'll wish you'd rushed our guns after all."

Ledlie and his friends found it was wasted effort to try to slip their bonds. They kept at it doggedly until exhausted and sleep overcame them. As day dawned, the four grimly renewed their efforts. A pitiless sun beat down and thirst became a torture. All that day, at intervals, they struggled against the binding ropes in growing desperation.

Nightfall afforded some relief, but they had made no progress toward release. The Ridott gang had left the captives and the wagon on the side of the hill farthest from the trail, so that, if anyone passed that way before death took its toll, the chance of their being found was reduced to a minimum.

The second day of captivity was ushered in by a blinding sun. About midmorning, Ledlie raised his head from the ground, saying thickly, "Hear horses! Yell your loudest, fellows!"

Bone-dry throats emitted a chorus that seemed to get results. The hoofbeats, mingled with the clank of accoutrements, drew closer to the hill. Blue-clad horsemen rounded the base. A rider with the epaulets of a first lieutenant of cavalry, barked a command and the troop slowed to a dusty halt. The lieutenant and a grizzled sergeant swung from saddles to kneel beside the bound figures.

"I'm Lieutenant Cole, from Arrowhead," the officer said, as he severed the ropes on Ledlie with his saber. "We're out on maneuvers. Came across some loose horses up at the waterhole. Wondering who they belong to, I was backtracking them when I heard your cries. Who left you this way?"

Ledlie, moving about slowly to restore circulation, told how the drive had been waylaid. Lieutenant Cole, frowning, said that a heard of cattle had been delivered at the fort late the previous day. Ross clenched his teeth.

"You say our horses are at the waterhole, lieutenant. Soon as we can ride, we'll hit west for the fort. Who's the quartermaster? That Ridott gang must've fooled him somehow, to pass off the herd as their own. The post's been buyin' from a cowman named Briscoe."

The sergeant passed around his canteen. All hands drank sparingly, though water had never tasted so delicious. Lieutenant Cole sent a squad out to bring in the horses. The troopers left the stockmen preparing breakfast with provisions from the wagon.

As their strength returned, Ledlie and the Haskells picked up the saddles scattered on the ground. Sawney, harness in hand, went to hitch up the team. They would have felt easier in mind if there had been guns to fill empty holsters, for Ridott and his men might be hanging around the army post.

With no cattle to drive, they were able to make fast time to Fort Arrowhead, coming in sight of the stockade as the sunset gun boomed. Challenged by the sentry at the gate, the riders and the wagon were allowed to pass after Ledlie stated he had business with Captain Fillmore. In the quartermaster's office, Ross told his story to a sharp-eyed, gray-mustached man, showing him the cattle transfer signed by Owen Briscoe.

Captain Fillmore nodded slowly. "I believe they were your cattle, but I paid the man who represented himself as Briscoe's new foreman, replacing McComb. Said his name was Stack Ridott, that he'd be here next month with another herd. Of course, I'm not doing business with a cow thief if I know it."

He tapped his desk, his brow furrowed. "I don't know just what to do about this. We need the beef, but obviously the wrong man got the money. See if you can locate Ridott. If not, let me know. He left with his outfit shortly after bringing the cattle."

"You bet I'll look for him," said Ross "There's some skulduggery I ain't got to the bottom of yet. Guess I've lost out on the beef contract. You see, captain, I'm startin' in business for myself."

"I certainly won't buy from Ridott again," said the quartermaster. "If Briscoe doesn't come through with next month's delivery in person, there'll be a chance for you, Ledlie."

IT DIDN'T sound very hopeful to Ross. Remaining overnight at the fort, he and his men made an early start for home They had obtained six-shooters at the post sutler's, were ready for Ridott's rustlers if encountered on the way. It looked as though Briscoe had made a last desperate play to hold the contract, sending a strange outfit after them so that he could disclaim any part in it if the rustling failed.

When Ledlie's outfit finally reached Soapweed, they stopped at the sheriff's office to report the trail theft.

"What's Stack Ridott look like?" asked Bigelow. "I don't remember ever cuttin' his trail. I'll see what can be done about it."

The sheriff didn't seem much interested, kept eyeing the Haskells and Sawney. Ross knew what he was thinking, that any man who hired ex-convicts wasn't above suspicion himself. It only made Ross more determined to keep them on and prove they were reformed. When they left the jail office, Sawney parked the chuck wagon in a nearby wagonyard and saddled his horse to ride south with the others.

Rufe Chilton's Cinch Ring ranch lay between Soapweed and Briscoe's Drag B. Ledlie's outfit turned in at the Cinch Ring gateway. Although he had little hope now of securing the army post contract, Ross had money enough for a small herd and a down payment on the grass lease. He must be sure of having a range before he bought stock, hence it was important to see Chilton at once.

OLD RUFE, in his shirt sleeves, was smoking a pipe on the porch when the four riders whirled up to the house. As they dismounted, Irene and her mother appeared, the girl echoing her father's hearty greeting. Mrs. Chilton was silent, her eyes narrowing on the three men who trailed Ross up the steps.

"Something wrong?" said Irene, her smile fading as she sensed that Ledlie was forcing a grin.

He told her of their misadventure, adding, "But luckily the gang didn't get my money. I'll still be able to go into the cow business if I can take up that grass lease. How about it, Mr. Chilton?"

Old Rufe twisted uneasily in his chair "Well, you see, Ross. I've decided I need it for my own stock. I aim to renew that lease. Sorry."

"What you mean, Dad," exclaimed Irene, her cheeks suddenly flaming, "is that Mother persuaded you not to let Ross have it. We'd just as well call a spade a spade. She doesn't want Ross to get ahead, is afraid I like him better than Owen. And I do, even if Ross never owns anything but a horse and saddle. But, for his own sake, I want him to make good as a cowman. You ought to do your part, Dad. You promised."

The cowman sucked moodily on his pipe. "Let your mother answer that. She's listenin'."

"All right, I will!" Mrs. Chilton swept onto the porch. She pointed an accusing finger at the Haskells and Sawney. "Do you know who those men are? Rustlers that lately returned from serving a five-year jail sentence! When I was in Soapweed yesterday, Mrs. Bigelow, the sheriff's wife, told me her husband said that Ross Ledlie had taken up with three bad ones and he meant to watch 'em. Let 'em have that grass lease Rufe, and in a week's time you'll be missin' cattle from your own pastures."

Chilton's eyebrows lifted. "That true about your hands, Ross?"

Ledlie's face had darkened. "About their havin' been in jail, yes, not the part about stealin' from you. They're through with that. Never mind the grass lease. We'll get along without it. Right now, Mrs. Chilton, we're ridin' to Briscoe's to ask him some mighty pointed questions regardin' the gang that jumped us."

"What would Owen know about that?" the rancher's wife retorted acidly. "You'd best leave him alone or he'll have the sheriff on you."

Irene laid a hand on Ross's arm. "I think Mother and Dad are acting shamefully. But I can't do anything about it. I don't want you to go away thinking that I—"

"Not a chance, Irene!" A smile broke over Ross's face, he took her hand in his

own and squeezed it. "I'll let you know what comes of our visit to the Drag B."

Jogging out of the ranch yard, Greg Haskell remarked to Ledlie:

"Once you're down, there's always plenty ready with a kick to keep you down. Seein' that you're gettin' a bad rep travelin' in our company—"

Ross faced him squarely. "If it don't bother me, it shouldn't bother you. I'd like it if you wouldn't mention that again, Greg."

"That old lady's a wildcat and the old man's under her claws," chuckled Jud Haskell. "But you picked yourself a swell girl, Ross."

"She's the best there is, Jud. Old Rufe ain't half bad, either, though he lets his wife run him."

The Drag B ranch had a deserted look as the four riders passed down the road fronting it, toward the main gate. Uncertain of their welcome if Briscoe had a guilty conscience, they got down from saddles halfway to the house, walked on warily with arms brushing gunladen hips.

Reaching the door without drawing a shot, Ledlie was about to knock when Briscoe's voice called, "Come in!" They went in swiftly, with drawn Colts, not sure but that a burst of gunfire would greet them.

Ledlie was first to lower his six-shooter. Briscoe, his face pale, sat in an armchair. His coat was off, a bandage swathed his chest, and his right arm hung in a sling.

"If you were lookin' for a fight," he said, "I'm not in shape to accommodate you. Sit down, Ross, and tell me how you made out at the fort."

"Figured you'd know," said Ledlie, with a puzzled frown. "Ever hear of a cow thief named Stack Ridott?"

CHAPTER IV

BRISCOE repeated the name, his eyes half lidded, as if, thought Ledlie, he were carefully considering his answer. "Yes," he nodded. "He's a rustler, all right. Works mostly in the county below, but sometimes he gets this way. I've lost cattle to him."

"Then," said Ross, pulling a chair between his legs, "you could hardly have hired him to trail us and grab our herd."

"Not me!" declared Briscoe, so vehemently that it sounded, for once, like the truth. "What happened?"

The Haskell boys and Sawney, watching Owen narrowly, took chairs while Ross related the particulars of the rustling. At the end, Ledlie asked, "If you didn't send that gang after us, how was it Ridott told Captain Fillmore he was your new foreman? He called me by name, too."

"I suppose he's been spying around, knew all about us," replied Briscoe. "Drivin' Drag B cattle, naturally he'd tell the quartermaster he worked for me. I see you're wonderin' how I got shot up. My outfit tried to rob me when I paid 'em off for the last time. Bunch of skunks!"

"For the last time?" echoed Ross. "You mean you're quittin' the cattle business?"

"Yes," said Briscoe. "Surprised? The game's too tough. I need a rest. I've had an offer to deal faro at the Saddleman's Saloon. While you were gone, I sold the rest of my stock to a man in the next county."

Ledlie whistled. Believing that there were a thousand or more cattle in the Drag B iron, he didn't see how Briscoe had got rid of them in such a short time. "Kinda quick decision, wasn't it, Owen? How come you didn't sell to the army, or even hold some for me?"

Greg Haskell put in harshly, "Don't try to kid us, Owen. What's the real lowdown?"

"Just what I've told you," Briscoe answered. "The fort wouldn't take all that beef at one time. This buyer would."

"If you're gettin' out," said Ross in sudden elation, "I'll be able to bid for the contract, providin' I can buy enough cattle cheap. I need range, too. Chilton turned me down on the grass lease. It was his wife's doin'."

"Yeh?" Owen thought a moment. "I was goin' to put up my range for sale, but I'd just as soon lease to you."

"Watch him when he wants to do you a favor, Ross!" warned Greg.

"I will," Ledlie nodded, remembering

the poker game. "If he has a deed, that'll show the land is his to lease."

"It's in the second drawer of that desk." Owen jerked a hand toward a roll-top desk in the corner, threw an angry look at Haskell. "And you be hanged, Greg! You will be someday."

"If I am, I won't be alone on the hang-tree," returned Greg.

"Before I look at that deed," Ross went on, "I want to talk terms, Owen. Can't pay a lot for grazin' land."

"All right, make your own terms," said Briscoe. "I've had my fill of cattle. But there's one thing you want to do; watch sharp for that rustlin' Ridott gang and kill 'em like lobos."

"I'd sure like to meet up with Ridott and collect for the two hundred and fifty head of beeves." Ledlie rose to go to the desk. "By the way, what will Irene Chilton think of your turnin' professional gambler?"

Briscoe gave him a long look. "Ain't we all gamblers, one way or another? If she loves me, what's the difference how I make money?"

WITHIN the week, Ledlie's outfit took possession of the Drag B, a town lawyer drawing up papers for the letting of Briscoe's land. Owen moved to the Soapweed hotel to recuperate from his wounds before taking up his duties at the faro layout. Ross registered a brand, the Box 8, and sent his men back to the ranch with the chuck wagon.

Ledlie set forth alone to buy cattle with his remaining cash. He was still in doubt that Owen Briscoe had quit ranching for the reasons stated. Perhaps Briscoe and Ridott had worked together, then had a falling out. But, so far as Ross could see, he was making no blunder in leasing range to which Owen had proved ownership. It was the only available grazing land in the county. Ross's last instructions to his riders were to keep an eye out for Stack Ridott during his absence.

Keeping his promise to Irene Chilton, Ross saw her for a few moments at the Cinch Ring corral. Well-pleased at his prospects, she had little to say concerning Owen's sudden shift to the role of faro dealer. Ross gathered that she wasn't interested enough to care what Owen did.

"Dad could let you have the cattle you want," said Irene, "but I guess Mother would oppose it, just as she did your getting the grass lease. He'd probably listen to her, though he really likes you, Ross."

"I wouldn't ask him again to help me out," Ross said, a stubborn set to his jaw. "Better not mention the beef contract. He'll find out soon enough. I don't want him or anybody beatin' me to it while I haven't a single head of stock to offer Captain Fillmore. You know, Irene," he added earnestly, "I'm doin' this for both of us."

"I know," the girl answered softly. "I won't repeat any of this conversation. I want you to succeed. But even if you don't, what I said the other day about your owning just a horse and a saddle still goes, Ross."

Suddenly she rose on tiptoe and her lips brushed his cheek. Eluding his outflung arms, she fled to the house. Ross waited for her to turn in the doorway, shot his hand up, and Irene waved back. The blood was singing in his veins as he put toe in stirrup, swung to the saddle.

FOR several days, Ledlie rode the Pinto Mesa range, vainly seeking cattle that could be bought at a price low enough to allow a margin of profit in selling to the army post. He was guarded in speech, for one careless word to the cattlemen he interviewed would have started them all bidding for the contract. None apparently knew that Briscoe, still confined to his hotel room, had withdrawn from the cattle trade.

Disappointed at his lack of success, Ross returned to the Briscoe ranch late one afternoon. The Haskells and Sawney, seeing how he felt, tried to cheer him up. Greg said there'd been no sign of Stack Ridott wolfing around the range.

"We're not licked yet, boys," said Ledlie. "Tomorrow I'll start makin' the rounds of ranches in another district. It's a good thing we have a couple of weeks before the date of delivery."

He was in the saddle again an hour after dawn. Greg, Judd and Sid, gloomily discussing the situation now that Ross was out of hearing, repaired to the corral and put broncs under leather for the day's watchful riding. They only wished that Stack Ridott's gang would show up to break the monotony. Sid Sawney was the first to descry dust issuing from a ravine as they loped down the range.

"That's cattle or a big bunch of horses!" he exclaimed, facing the alert Greg and Jud. "And who'd be drivin' them onto seemin'ly deserted range but saddle lobos bent on escapin' John Law's eagle eye!"

"It's likely that whiskered gent we're lookin' for, Stack Ridott," said Greg, his face hardening. "We'll ride a little closer, then quit the cayuses and Injun up!"

Covering the last hundred yards to the dust-boiling ravine on foot, the trio slithered to its grass-fringed rim and gazed below. Long since, bovine voices had proclaimed it was cattle, not horses, that had been driven to that secluded spot. Sweeping his eyes over the riders crowding the cattle to one side of the gorge, Greg leaned toward his companions:

"Most of 'em's the Drag B boys we saw that first night at Briscoe's campfire. Two are fellers that was with Ridott when he jumped us on the drive trail. But I don't see Stack himself."

A couple of men dismounted, pulling iron rods from their riding gear that the watchers above easily recognized as running irons, having used such tools themselves. Gathering dry brush into a big pile, they lighted it, their grumbling conversation carrying to the trio on the rim.

"Ridott ought've put the whole crew to brandin' these critters," said one, "instead of ridin' off with half of 'em to carouse at that town across the county line. 'Have the cattle ready to hit the army post trail by the time we get up to Drag B,' he says."

"I ain't likin' it, either," growled his mate. "But when Stack shot Owen, mad at him for gamblin' away that other herd, we had to go to work for Stack or ride grubline. You reckon he killed Owen for sure?"

The other nodded, shoving the irons into the roaring fire. "Briscoe was layin' on the floor in a pool of blood, when we left. I never liked Owen enough to stand up for him. Too tricky. He had a good thing of it, actin' as fence for the cattle Ridott rustled. It was a dang fool move to put up that herd in a poker game, when he knew he couldn't pay Stack what was due him if he lost. But old Ridott got 'em back, found the quartermaster swallered his tale of bein' Briscoe's foreman, and figured he'd be safe and savin' money to do away with Briscoe altogether. But I dunno. If he keeps showin' up at the fort without Briscoe, there'll be questions asked. Owen bein' dead, how long will Stack be able to use this range for rebrandin' stolen critters?"

Up on the edge of the ravine, Greg Haskell expelled his breath sharply. "So that's how it was! Jud, you slide back and bring the broncs. We're goin' to spring a surprise on them branders."

JUD HASKELL crawled away from the rim, got to his feet and ran at top speed. The irons in the fire were red-hot, ropers were building loops to cut out cattle for rebranding, when Colts banged at the mouth of the ravine. A brander, wringing out a piece of gunnysacking he had soaked in the stream that ran through the gorge, spun on his heels. His companion fell beside the fire, Colt half drawn.

As the horsemen dropped ropes and filled their hands with steel to fire back at the mounted Haskell boys blocking the entrance, Sid Sawney opened up from the outlet. They had the cow thieves bottled up.

"It's like shootin' fish in a barrel!" yelled Greg, jerking his head as a bullet grazed his jaw. He threw down on the man who had nearly given him his ticket, brought the rustler crashing to earth.

Greg's foresight in attacking from the saddle was proven a few minutes later. As the waddies were cut down, one after another, the herd, crazed by the powder burning, split up and plunged for both ends of the ravine. Quickly reloading, the Haskells and Sawney held their excited

horses across the narrow vents and blazed away, over the rattling irons of the whitefaces. The Herefords rebounded from either smoky opening, crowded in a bawling mass toward the center of the ravine. While the trio guarded the portals against another rush, guns silent but held at the ready, the herd gradually quieted.

"We'd 'a' had some chase to round 'em up if they'd got out," Greg remarked to his brother as they kicked their mounts into the ravine. "We got a big job ahead changin' that brand, whatever it is, to Ross's Box 8."

"You think we ought to do it?" Jud said uneasily. "I was aimin' never to burn another brand."

"Me, too," said Greg. "But you know Ross has mighty little chance of gettin' cheap cattle in time to sew up that army contract. Ross stood our friend when everybody else turned us down. It's up to us to help him any way we can—though I hate to deceive him. Sid and you both agreed to do it before the attack, so don't try to back out now."

"I won't," said Jud, but his eyes were clouded.

Sawney, coming from the outlet, met them, and the scattered branding fire was rebuilt, the irons thrust into it to heat again. Picking up the wet gunnysacking, Sid said, "You do the ropin', Jud. Greg and me are best with the runnin' iron."

It was no task to be finished in a day. They weren't worried about Ledlie returning too soon, but kept their eyes peeled for the rest of the Ridott gang. The rustlers had not appeared by the time the last Hereford had had a Box 8 worked over its Bar Z brand. Of course, those new burns would take a week or two to heal.

Greg Haskell, knowing he would have to account for the cattle in a way to satisfy his young boss, made a hurried trip to Soapweed. He left his brother and Sawney guarding the herd. They had taken time off from branding to bury the rustlers, leaving no trace of the conflict.

OWEN BRISCOE hadn't left his hotel room since coming to Soapweed, except for a stroll about town. He was seated at the front window when Greg Haskell rode up and tied at the hotel rack. Owen scowled. It looked as if Greg was coming to see him. He wouldn't be a welcome visitor.

Presently, Haskell was at Briscoe's door, sticking his head in to glance about cautiously, then easing his long frame through the doorway with a grin that chilled Owen's blood.

"I'll set here at the winder opposite you, Owen," said Greg, dragging a chair across the carpet. "Got the deadwood on you right! You won't lie out of this like you did five years ago when your rustler pals was caught. I know why you quit the cow business and was so keen to lease Ledlie your range. You hoped Ross would bump off Stack when he came prowlin' around there, preventin' him from finishin' the job of killin' you. You had no cattle left, only what Ridott rustled and you sold for him."

Briscoe started up in his chair, then sank back. "Go on, Greg. You seem to know what you're sayin'."

"You bet I do, Owen. When I'm finished, I'm offerin' to keep mum about you if you'll just add one more lie to the thousands you've told, and make it convincin'."

Before Haskell was through talking, Briscoe was nodding his head. "I see what you want me to do, Greg. That's easy enough."

The visitor's gaze roved toward the cowtown street. Suddenly he pushed up the window and bawled out, "Hey, Ross! Come up here!"

Trotting along the thoroughfare, Ledlie raised a surprised face to the hotel window. He tossed a hand at Greg and turned his horse toward the curb. Dismounting, he climbed the hotel stairway and entered Briscoe's room.

Haskell was on his feet. "Get any cattle, Ross? No, I see by your face you didn't. But you're in luck, just the same. While you was gone, we discovered a lot of Drag B cattle that Owen's men had overlooked in the brush. Three hundred odd, more'n enough to drive to the fort and cinch that contract. We branded 'em all in your iron. Not havin' a stamp-iron,

we just changed the Drag B into Box 8 with hot cinch rings."

Ledlie's face lighted up. "That's great news, for I wasn't able to buy what I wanted. I'll order some stamp-irons made. What do I owe you for the cattle, Owen?"

"Not a dime," said Briscoe. "Your boys had the work of diggin' them out of the brush. Take 'em to replace that first herd you lost."

Ross stared at him, then smiled. "That's mighty generous, Owen. I'll have to stop thinkin' hard things of you."

Haskell shoved Ledlie doorward. "Let's start ridin', Ross. It's gettin' late. Didn't expect you for another day or two."

Night had fallen by the time they were in sight of the ranch. Putting the horses in the corral, they strode into the house, Ross snatching a match to light up. Just then hoofbeats were heard, pounding up the yard from the south. As they stepped to the door, Jud Haskell and Sid Sawney flung themselves from saddles and tumbled up the porch steps.

"Ross!" exclaimed Jud, as the light fell on Ledlie in the doorway. "When'd you get home? Anyway," he hurried on, glancing at Greg, "Stack Ridott's gang is chasin' us. They showed up while we was ridin' herd. Provin' too many for us, we showed our back hair and they hit our trail a-flyin'. They'll be here any—listen, you can hear 'em comin' now!"

CHAPTER V

LEDLIE, thinking fast, blew out the lamp and hustled them all into the back room. "I want them sons-of-guns, specially Ridott! Maybe they'll traipse in if we hold fire, believin' Jud and Sid are the only two on the ranch. Guess they were surprised to recognize you boys."

The rustlers thundered up to the house, could be heard riding to and fro in growing uncertainty when no six-guns challenged their approach. Stack Ridott couldn't understand the setup.

Instead of the men he had sent to rebrand the rustled herd, he had found two of Ledlie's riders guarding the cattle, with an unfamiliar brand worked on their hides. It was disquieting enough to learn the four men left to die on the drive trail had apparently been rescued, for they would have visited the fort afterward exposing Ridott as a thief. Added to that, it appeared Ledlie's outfit had thrown down on Briscoe's range and hijacked the second herd, destroying Stack's men. Ridott began to think he hadn't killed Briscoe, that the latter, in revenge, had formed an alliance with Ledlie to finish the gang.

When a volley directed at the house smashing the windows drew no response, Ridott ordered his men to dismount. If Jud Haskell and Sawney were hiding in there alone, he'd try to capture the pair and pry the truth out of them.

Ross, holding the inner door ajar, listened to the clack of boots crossing the porch. Ridott called from the front door, "You two trail out here with your paws up or we'll burn the house!"

When there was no reply, one of Stack's men suggested that the cowhands were hiding in the barn. Ridott said they'd go through the house and make sure. The owlhooters began filing warily from the room. Ridott was foremost. Groping toward the connecting door, his progress was suddenly stopped by a gun poking him in the chest. Ledlie grated:

"I'll tunnel you if you move, Stack!"

Ridott reacted in desperation. He flung himself sideways. Ross, thumbing hammer, felled the rustler directly behind the leader. The cow thief dropped, screaming. Instantly Ridott's Colt spurted red. But he was off balance, the bullet struck the half-open door. More muzzle fire poured from rustler guns. Ledlie pushed the door wider, he and his hands squatting low to pitch lead into the other crowd.

"The house is full of 'em!" yelled Stack. "Break for the horses!"

A wild stampede ensued, lit by powder flashes. Agonized yells, the crash of bodies hitting the floor, mingled with the deafening roar of six-guns. Until the last rustlers able to run had squeezed through the front door, Ross and his men didn't leave the back room. Stumbling over yielding forms, they gained the porch and snapped shots at the outlaws spurring off

at top speed. Ledlie was disappointed to hear the rumble of Ridott's voice as sod-spurning hoofs carried the gang out of range.

"They'll be after the herd!" Ross cried. "Head for the corral!"

But Ridott, not sure how many men had laid that trap for him, felt it was safer to grab ground and try to recover the rustled stock another day. Swiftly as they saddled, Ledlie's outfit couldn't get up in shooting range of the gang. Finding themselves outdistanced, they pulled to a trot, turning off for the ravine.

FROM that night onward, until the day the herd rolled out for Fort Arrowhead, the stock was carefully guarded. But Stack Ridott wasn't taking unnecessary chances with the men left to him. Watching from afar, he knew when the cattle trailed up the range and turned west from Soapweed. Ridott followed.

Owen Briscoe lounged in the doorway of the Saddleman's Saloon as the Box 8 outfit drove past town. Fully recovered, he had been dealing faro for nearly a week. The previous day, Irene Chilton and her mother had come to town, and Owen's new occupation had made anything but a favorable impression.

Bitter thoughts crowded his brain. There at the head of those cattle rode his lucky rival, Ross Ledlie. When Ross returned, he would be the holder of that lucrative army contract unless Owen did something about it. There was something he could do, without entangling himself, but he'd have to watch his chance to slip into the sheriff's office when Bigelow wasn't there. Owen turned back into the saloon with a twisted smile. If Irene wouldn't marry a gambler, she wouldn't marry a cow thief, either.

Later in the day, Sheriff Bigelow, entering his office after an hour's absence, found an anonymous message lying on his desk. He read it with glinting eyes and called to his deputies to saddle up. It would be long past nightfall before they could overtake the Ledlie herd, but that suited the sheriff. Give them a chance to slip up in the dark.

The three lawmen spotted a campfire a little sooner than they expected. Unable to discover cattle in the vicinity, the sheriff went forward boldly, a bit perplexed to find the fire deserted. As the three sat their horses, the firelight was reflected from their shiny badges.

Gunflame lashed out of the night, downing the horses, wounding the lawmen. Bigelow and his deputies fought back gamely. They could tell from the sounds that they had at least nicked some of their attackers before the firing ceased.

Bigelow had no notion who had jumped them or the reason for it. The absence of cattle ruled out Ledlie's party. But the lawmen couldn't go on without horses and wounded as they were. They started limping back to Soapweed.

Bigelow had thought of telegraphing the army post that Ledlie was delivering rustled stock. But he decided against it. The rustlers might elude the troopers. He, Bigelow, could nail them, covering himself with glory, but just sitting quietly and nursing his wounds until the cow thieves hit Soapweed on the return trip.

The sheriff didn't know that his assailants of the night before drifted into town the next day. Managing to conceal the fact they were bullet-branded, certain that Bigelow and his deputies couldn't identify them, Stack Ridott's gang put up at the hotel. The fear that lawmen on the trail would upset their rustling plans had prompted Stack's murderous assault. Like the star-badgers, too crippled to continue on the westward road and risk a fight with Ledlie's outfit, the rustlers had come in to watch for Ross's return. He would have the cattle money with him. They'd be in shape to take it by the time he got there.

RIDOTT and Briscoe were startled to discover each other's presence in Soapweed. The rustler refused to believe that Owen hadn't aided in the attempt to trap him at the ranch. He told the faro dealer what he was after, adding no threats, but Owen knew the outlaw meant to drill him before leaving town. Yet, fearing for his life, Briscoe wouldn't go to the sheriff. Ridott was sure to implicate him if Bigelow went to arrest the

cow thief. Owen, therefore, awaited the day of Ledlie's return with trepidation.

It was night when the new Box 8 outfit lifted the dust once more on Soapweed's main street. The Chiltons, all of them, had been visiting their friends, the Learys, for the past day or two. Irene left her rocker on the porch to lean and peer over the railing. She spied Ross and sprang down the steps. Since coming to town, she had heard the sheriff drop strange remarks that bothered her.

Shrilling Ledlie's name, Irene ran to the middle of the street. Ross reined in sharply, dropped from the saddle. He gripped both her hands, his smile reaching nearly to his ears as he cried:

"Got the contract honey! Now all I've got to do is find more cattle to fill it."

She smiled and said that was fine, but sobered quickly. "Ross, there's something in the wind. The sheriff's been talking about giving someone the surprise of his life when he hits town. I got the idea he means you."

Greg Haskell, riding alongside in time to catch her words, hit the dirt. He called to his brother, "Tell Sid to park the wagon, and both of you come here!" He turned to Ross and the girl. "If Bigelow wants to wau-wau, we three will meet him. You run along with Miss Chilton, Ross, and keep out of it."

Ledlie threw him a surprised look. "Why should I? Out of what?"

Greg shook his head. "Don't question me. Please do like I ask."

Sawney, leaving the chuck wagon at the curb, hurried over with Jud Haskell. Before Ross could answer Greg, a man wearing a green eyeshade pelted across the street from the saloon to join the group.

"Ross," cried Owen Briscoe, "if you have that cattle money, get ready to defend it! Ridott and his gang are in town, layin' for you!"

Ledlie's eyes narrowed. "Well, what do you know! We kind of looked for 'em to strike on the road. Any notion where they are, Owen?"

"They were in the Saddleman's," began Briscoe, "but I don't—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of the grim-faced Bigelow, gun in hand. "Birds of a feather, eh, Ledlie? I knowed, trailin' with this jail-branded trash, it wouldn't long before you burnt brands!"

"Everybody's talkin' in riddles," Ross burst out. "If you mean the cattle I delivered at Arrowhead, they were some of Briscoe's. He'll tell you."

With his free hand, Bigelow produced a paper. "This unsigned note, left on my desk near a week ago, says the stock branded Box 8 was lifted from the Bar Z ranch. I checked on that with the owner."

GREG HASKELL made a dive for Briscoe, collaring him. "You're the rat who wrote that, Owen!" He jerked the faro dealer backward, barking at Jud and Sid, "Step over here with me!"

The pair moved in unison, putting several paces between them and the sheriff, Ledlie and Irene. Keeping a tight grip on Briscoe, Greg went on, "Us four are the men you want, Bigelow! Owen was a fence for Ridott; we changed the brands on them Bar Z cattle. But Ross didn't know it. He couldn't buy no cattle for the beef contract, and we aimed to help him out, because he had been kind to three ex-jailbirds. If Briscoe hadn't—"

A six-shooter cracked close by. Owen rose on his toes with a scream, sinking to the ground as Greg let go of him to yank his gun. The voice of Stack Ridott rang out:

"Me and my gang are beadin' you on every side! The rest of you'll bite the dirt like that traitor unless Ledlie tosses out that cattle money! The girl is a heap likely to get shot if we start mixin' smoke."

The voice issued from an alleyway. Sheriff Bigelow whirled and fired. An answering bullet knocked him down. Across the street, three .45's blazed and lead snarled by Ross and Irene. He whipped out his Colt, crying to the girl, "Flat on the ground!"

As she obeyed, Ross's gun roared. A man crouched by a wheel of the grub wagon flung up his arms and toppled sideways. The guns of the Haskells and Sawney opened up in a booming fusillade. There were outcries from shadowed spots on the sidewalk.

Men posted up and down the street blazed away. Sid Sawney folded with a gusty sigh, but his death was avenged the next instant. Back to back, the Haskell brothers lashed lead at the outlaws squatted in midstreet. Two crumpled forms were visible as they switched aim to other targets.

Ross, crouching over Irene, tripped a rustler darting from one shelter to another. He threw a shot up the alley where Ridott was pumping lead, heard it strike a board fence. Jud Haskell gave a groan and sagged to earth.

Ledlie, seeing the flash of the gun that ended him, cramped trigger. With a yell, the rustler spun out of a dark doorway and measured his length on the planks.

Three outlaw guns were still pounding, one of them Ridott's. Two men tried to close in on Ross and Greg with a rush, Colts aflame. Ledlie stopped one as he leaped off the boardwalk, rolling him into the gutter. The outlaw running toward Greg went down with a howl, but Greg, rocking gently for a moment, also buckled forward.

Ledlie detected a moving shape at the mouth of the alley, muzzle fire winked at him. He spotted lead on the blaze of powder. For a split-second, he thought he'd missed. Then Stack Ridott tottered into the half-light and flopped on his face, with his gun-arm bent under him.

Greg Haskell cried feebly, "Ross!" Ledlie scrambled to his side, seizing Greg's groping hand. "We aimed to help," gasped Greg, "but only made you more trouble. You ain't sore, Ross?"

Ross bent lower, peering into the staring eyes. "Not for a minute, pard!" He was sure Greg heard him, though his fingers went lax in Ledlie's hand. Greg Haskell had stopped breathing.

Ross didn't lift his head when a skirt rustled at his side. Irene said, "I don't blame them. You were their only friend. Everybody else was against them."

"Great guys," nodded Ross, a mist before his eyes. "Was the sheriff killed?"

"No. He's coming now, with Dad."

Ross stood up, fumbling at his shirt. He had a money belt in his hand when Bigelow arrived, leaning on Rufe Chilton. "This is the money for that last herd, Bigelow, to be returned to the Bar Z owner. Ridott collected for the other herd, as you know. I'm back where I started. Have an army contract, but no cattle to fill it."

As the sheriff accepted the money belt with a nod, Rufe Chilton exclaimed, "You're wrong about the last, Ross! A partner with a contract like that is just what I've been prayin' for. There's all the Cinch Ring whitefaces to pick from."

"Partner?" repeated Ross, a gleam in his eyes. "But your wife—"

"This is one time," declared Rufe, "she won't have any say in the matter!"

Irene plucked Ross's sleeve and he turned, gazing down at her glowing face. "Isn't that wonderful, Ross?"

"You think your mother will stand for me around the house, honey?"

"Are you a man or a mouse, Ross?"

With a chuckle, he swept her into his arms. "I'll show you! Once you kissed me and ran away. But you won't this time!"

Jingle of a Badman's Spurs

By Mel Holt

That frontier music-maker knew how to turn the discordant jingle of a rustler's spurs into the harmony of a law-triggered shoot-out.

I WAS standing at the bar in the Arcade Saloon, sipping my drink with slow enjoyment, when the gunshot sounded in the darkness outside. Over at the battered piano in the corner, the Professor's rendition of *Buffalo Gals* ended on a discord, and I saw him cast a startled glance at me as he spun around on his stool. I had no inkling then of the important role he was to play in the amazing events of that night.

In the ensuing rush for the door, I was first to reach the boardwalk outside the saloon. After all, as town marshal, it was my job. The other customers came pouring out behind me, and there was a hurdy-gurdy of excited voices. I glanced right and left through the dim moonlight of the street, and finally noticed a huddled form only a few steps down the walk. It was sprawled partly in the shadows near the alley running between the Arcade and the General Mercantile.

It hadn't occurred to me till then that the shot had come from the alley. I bounded into it and stopped short, sliding my six-shooter from leather. There was danger here. A slight breeze sighed through the alley and brought with it the faint sound of retreating footsteps and the jingle of spur rowels.

I yelled, "Halt!" and dived headlong as powder flame tore at me from the blackness ahead and a whining slug chipped splinters off the wall of the mercantile just to my left. I had the darkness to thank for that shot going wild. I raised to one elbow and triggered a reply, but knew my slug had missed for the same reason.

The mysterious gunman vanished like a phantom. Suddenly I couldn't hear the spurs any more, and in the short time it took me to gather up my nerve and amble on to the end of the alley, he must have been making hurried tracks.

Anyway, I found no trace of him in the weed-grown back lots. I spent several minutes scouting the sagging ruins of a barn and corral back there, but the search was fruitless. Of course, I speculated, he could easily have doubled back through another alley and joined the string of men who were hastening along the street to investigate the shooting.

When I returned to the Arcade barroom, men were shoving to get a view of the figure lying on the table in the center of the room. A path opened up through the crowd and I met Doc Summers coming out, lugging his stethoscope and black satchel. He went past me without speaking, but the doleful shake of his gray head told me that his services wouldn't be needed here.

THE man they'd carried in and put on the table was whiskery Zeb Carlton, who owned a small one-man spread down beneath the rim of Hondo Mesa. Carlton's grassland was poor, and his shabby clothes and the big patches now visible on the soles of his cowhide boots bore mute testimony to his failure in the cattle business. He was dead, his pale eyes open and glazed. A bullet had ripped out

an ugly hole in his chest near the heart. It was good, I thought, that he'd been a bachelor. At least I wouldn't have the unpleasant duty of notifying a bereaved family.

The coroner, Burt Finnegan, stood beside me, chewing glumly on a cigar. I said, "Well, Burt?"

He gestured toward the corpse. "I find that the deceased, Zeb Carlton, met death as the result of a gunshot wound," he announced from behind the smelly cigar.

"Is that," I ground out testily, "all you've got to tell me?"

He shrugged. "I'm only the coroner. The solving of crime in our fair city, I believe, is one of your duties as marshal. You care to examine the *corpus delicti* for possible clues?"

I'd seen enough already, and it hadn't set very well with the supper I'd eaten. I turned away, and Finnegan got somebody to help him lug Carlton's remains from the room. The crowd hadn't thinned out much. Seemed like most of them were hanging around to see what I would do about the killing.

"Now why would anybody want to shoot a broken-down derelict like Carlton?" I ruminated out loud.

There was a strained silence. Somebody fidgeted nervously, and I saw that it was Ed Morgan, whose Tumbling M was the largest ranch in the basin. Standing next to him was his neighbor, Frank Cain of the Spearhead, who shifted his eyes away when I looked at him. Both these men had been friends of my father. I didn't know them very well at the time, for I'd spent several years back East, and since I'd returned about a year ago the job of town marshal had required most of my time.

I waited, but neither cattleman spoke. It was the Professor who finally came to their rescue. I remember thinking at the time that it was none of the long-haired, sad-faced piano player's damned business, but I didn't know then of the scheme he had in mind.

Yeah, I sure underestimated the Professor. He was a queer sort, anyway—no matter where he appeared in town, he always seemed sorta out of place with his gracious manners and dressed in his pinstripe trousers and swallowtail coat. Where he came from and why he chose to stay on here, nobody knew. He said he liked the town and its people. But if I had the Professor's talented fingers, I'd go places in the field of music.

"Carlton was in here earlier this evening, marshal," he said now, "and had rather a heated discussion with Morgan and Cain. You've heard, of course, that both these ranchers had stated they've been losing cattle to some unknown party. But that goes beyond your jurisdiction as town marshal. This killing, however, seems to have thrown the thing right in your lap."

"You lost many cattle?" I asked Morgan.

"Not enough to hurt me much, naturally, but a man can't sit back and let some damned rustler make a living at his expense," replied Morgan. "I've lost fully forty head already."

"Me, too," echoed Frank Cain.

"The point is," the Professor cut in, "that tonight Carlton charged Morgan and Cain with implying that *he* was the thief, and he was quite enraged about it. I trust you'll forgive me, gentlemen," he added, feeling the ranchers' stern glares upon him, "but I feel the marshal should be fully informed of the facts."

"We haven't made any direct accusations," Cain countered, scowling. "It does look suspicious, though. Carlton's two-bit spread touches both our ranches, and he certainly needed money. His few scrawny cattle are practically worthless."

"But Carlton seemed to think they weren't losing cattle at all—just trying to put him in a bad light," the Professor continued, turning to me. "He said it was because they had a grudge against the small-fry cattlemen of which he was typical, and wanted to disgrace him so he would be forced to leave this range. He also implied that Morgan and Cain would be eager to grab up the waterhole on his land after he was gone."

"Did anybody side in with Carlton in his argument tonight?" I asked, getting interested.

"Yeah, I did," another voice came from

the crowd, and young Johnny Ringo stepped forward.

JOHNNY, too, had started ranching on a shoestring, but with more success if you judged by his forty-dollar Stetson and bench-made boots. Johnny was a likable young blade, usually smiling from ear to ear. Only he wasn't smiling now.

"I think Carlton was right," he said with a contemptuous glance at the two cattlemen. "Us two-bit ranchers has tough sledding, and with these two high-and-mighty gents trying to freeze us out, it sure don't make things any easier. You'd think they owned the whole world, the way they strut around."

"We're not trying to freeze anybody out!" Morgan blurted angrily. "And we can't make friends with men who're so damned suspicious of us they won't give us the chance."

"Simmer down, you hombres," I snapped impatiently. "We're trying to solve a killing here. Professor, suppose you continue."

The Professor nodded with dignity. "Carlton mentioned that, while taking a short cut to town this evening, he discovered some mysterious cattle tracks in the bottom of a dry arroyo near his place, and he intended to look into the matter. He suspected Morgan or Cain, or both, of trying to frame him. He expected to have proof of that by tomorrow, he said, and if such were the case he would come looking for them with a gun!"

In his anger Carlton had let the knowledge of his discovery slip out, I reasoned, and that slip had signed his death warrant. It was tough, having to suspect my dad's old friends of murder. But under the circumstances I had no other choice.

A sudden thought struck me. "Maybe there's an easy way to find the killer. Whoever it is, his gun's been fired recently and he's had no time to clean it. Morgan, suppose you and Cain let me examine *your* guns."

"This is an outrage!" Morgan raved. "You young whippersnapper, I knew your pappy for a long time, even helped make it possible for him to send you off to school back East, though that debt is squared now. Old Tom didn't aim for you to fill his place as marshal after he passed on, otherwise he wouldn't have educated you. Now when you start involving Frank and me in a murder, you're going too far!"

Nevertheless both he and Cain yielded to my authority. I examined both their heavy forty-fives, sniffing the muzzles for the tattle-tale scent of burnt powder. And I was relieved to find their guns clean. But I didn't stop there; before I was through I'd checked the muzzle of every gun in the room, for nearly all these men admitted being present when Carlton had visited the saloon earlier. Still I didn't find the right gun.

"Reckon I'm stumped for the time being," I finally admitted. "You men can go now. I'll have to think this thing out." For the benefit of Morgan and Cain, I added, "If I've trampled on anybody's toes, I'm sorry."

It was then that the Professor dropped his bombshell.

"One moment, marshal. I think I can tell you who killed Carlton."

He said it very quietly, but nothing could have caused a greater stir of excitement in the room just then. "Spill it," I snapped.

"First we must conduct a little experiment," the Professor said slyly. "I want to hear all these men jingle their spurs."

Things were getting crazier by the minute. When I had restored order, I looked long and hard at the Professor, trying to figure him out.

"Elucidate, Professor," I said, "and it'd better be good."

"I know you must think me addled," he began. "But as soon as the shot was fired, I hurried to the side window to ascertain the cause and results. Someone—it must have been the killer—went past me through the dark alley, and I distinctly heard the jingle of his spurs. Possibly you heard it, too, but attached no significance to the sound. But to a man like myself, endowed with a keen sense of musical pitch, it is another matter entirely. A man's spurs make a definite musical sound when he walks. In the case of the man in the alley, it was the key

of F, over two octaves above middle C. I feel certain I would recognize those spurs if I heard them again."

WELL, the idea sounded pretty far-fetched to me, but maybe the Professor had something. I was grasping at straws, willing to try anything that might get the answer to the shooting.

"Line up at the bar, you men wearing spurs," I ordered. "Then walk across the room, one at a time, and line up again against the wall. You ready, Professor?"

The Professor nodded. Morgan stood closest to me, so I told him to go first. Sullenly he crossed the barroom, and a hushed expectancy settled over the crowd. The jingle of Morgan's gooseneck spurs was the only sound in the room.

"We can eliminate Morgan," announced the Professor, as though he were a jury foreman reading an acquittal.

Frank Cain was next. The Professor cocked his head and listened intensely. When Cain stopped beside Morgan, I looked inquiringly at the Professor, but he shook his head slowly.

"You're next, Johnny," I said.

Like most of the others, Johnny Ringo must have figured this was nonsense. He started walking, spurs clinking gaily, and I found myself liking his devil-may-care grin and the wide squareness of his shoulders. But I was jolted back to grim reality when I noticed the queer glint in the eyes of the Professor.

"I regret this, Johnny," he began, "but—"

Johnny Ringo had reached the opposite wall and turned around. I was foolish not to have drawn my gun before this. Now Johnny had beaten me to it. His six-shooter snapped up level, the muzzle weaving slowly to hold the entire crowd at bay. His snarl and the cold steeliness of his eyes were things new to all of us.

"Stay put, all of you," he warned. "And you, marshal, keep your hand away from your gun."

"I savvy now, Johnny, why I found no powder smudges on your gun," I told him. "All of a sudden I'm remembering a little habit of yours, carrying an extra gun in your saddlebags. You told me that once yourself, but it had slipped my mind."

I saw the whole setup clearly now. Morgan and Cain had been losing cattle, all right. But it was Johnny, not Carlton, who'd been sneaking them away. Johnny's place was the last this side of the badlands, so it was easy for him to sell the wet beef to border renegades who hung out back in there. Learning that Carlton had stumbled onto the hidden trail he'd been using to move the stock, he got rid of Carlton before the man had a chance to follow the trail to its end.

Johnny was moving slowly toward the door now. His horse waited at the tie-rail just outside, and I knew the animal had plenty of speed and endurance. We'd never catch Johnny, once he got through that door.

"Too bad it happened like this, Johnny," I said, trying to delay him. "I've always liked you, but—"

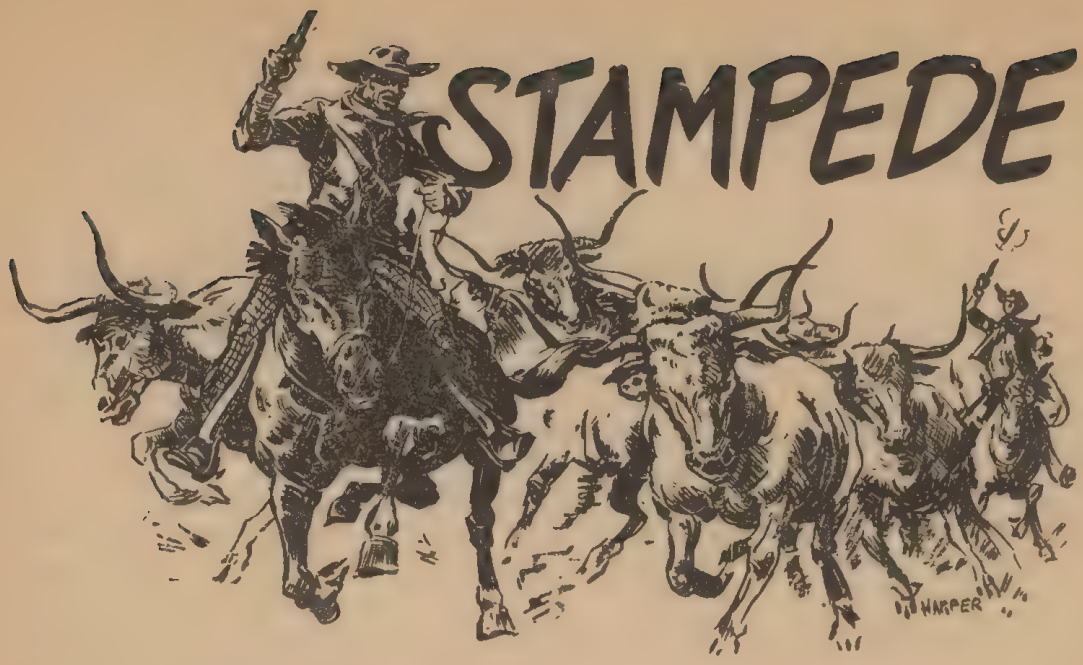
A gunshot, high-pitched and spiteful, stopped what I was going to say. I saw Johnny spin half around, blood seeping from a wound in his right shoulder. His gun thudded on the floor, his right hand hung useless . . . .

As for the Professor, nobody had ever guessed that he carried a small single-shot derringer inside his coat. That nickel-plated pea-shooter packed quite a wallop, and he'd used it well on Johnny Ringo.

The Professor was full of surprises that night. He sprang another big one when, as I started to take the wounded prisoner down to the lockup, I turned to thank him for what he'd done.

"Trapping a killer by the sound of his spurs is a new one on me," I grinned. "Smart headwork, Professor."

The sad-faced old galoot gave a sigh. "No, marshal, it was merely a hoax—a trick designed to frighten the young man into admitting his own guilt. You see, I felt reasonably certain in my own mind that he was our man. I noticed that he appeared pale and overexcited in the presence of the dead man. And I recalled that I had seen him wagering unduly large sums of money in the gambling room of late, so tonight I concluded that he must be the cattle thief in question."



Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

REIN up your broncs, pards, and mosey over to Powder River Bill's writin' roundup. Pen-pushers from all over the world are just honin' to tell you about faraway ranges and the folks who live on them. Rope yourselves some new amigos by sending in your letters to the Stampede department. You'll find plenty of hombres and gals who would like to exchange snapshots, souvenirs, and learn about your hobbies.

And, too, Powder River Bill wants to savvy the type of yarns you cotton to, so that you can read them in WESTERN TRAILS. Don't fail to state the names of your favorite authors to insure your getting tophand stories of the brand you prefer. You'll be interested in this month's lineup of writin' rannyhans.

Write to a real ranch girl.

Dear Bill:

I was glancing through some of my dad's Western magazines and I saw WESTERN TRAILS among them. Dad reads the magazine all the time and I read them when he finishes. We both find them very exciting.

I once had a plea published in another magazine and I found many lasting friends among the hundreds of letters I received. Now that the war is over and times are better I would like to have some more.

I live on a ranch way out here in California and like it very much. I am eighteen, five feet, five inches tall, and have blue eyes and long brown hair. I enjoy all sports and I like to go to the movies when I get a chance. I also like to write letters.

I would like to hear from anyone who cares to write; the age doesn't make any difference. I would like to hear from all the boys in the hospitals who have some time on their hands.

Always,

RITA BEILER
Route 3, Box 477
Los Gatos, Calif.

Come on, pen-pushers.

Dear Bill:

Just another pen-pusher who's a steady reader of WESTERN TRAILS and would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world.

I am eighteen years old, five feet, one inch tall. I have blue eyes, brown hair, and a nice tan since I'm a farmer's daughter. I love all sports and will exchange "pics" with everyone who so wishes.

I hope this pen pal receives just loads of letters.

PEANUTS LATOSKI
16898 Savage Rd.
Belleville, Mich.
R.F.D. 2

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch of their snapshot send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs write to

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenaw Avenue
Chicago, Il.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written about their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

A waddy from Wisconsin.

Dear Bill:

Have read your department for quite some time and finally decided to write. Would like pen pals, and promise to answer all letters interestingly.

I am twenty-three, five feet, eight inches tall, and have brown hair and eyes. I like dancing, movies, and farming. I live right in the heart of America's dairyland.

Hope to see this in print. Will expect lots of letters, and photos, too.

BOB FEHLING
608 Main St.
Jefferson, Wis.

A new name for the Bulletin Board.

Dear Bill:

I ran across a copy of WESTERN TRAILS and was surprised and happy to find your column. Now I read the book regularly. I would appreciate it very much if you would put my name on the Bunkhouse Bulletin and publish this letter.

I would like to hear from all of the pen pards. I promise to answer all letters promptly and exchange photos with those who write.

Yours truly,

KEITH J. WARREN
Herman, N. Y.

Here's a younker who likes sports.

Dear Bill:

I'm a boy of fourteen and I'd like pen pals who like the sports I do. I am a new reader of WESTERN TRAILS, and I like it very much. My favorite sports are basketball, baseball, and football. I also enjoy the movies.

I promise to write to anyone who writes to me.

FRANK QUARLES
Route 2
Durant, Okla.

Send some letters her way.

Dear Bill:

I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS for two years and it is tops with me. I am a girl of twenty, five feet, eight inches tall, and have brown hair and eyes.

I would like to hear from all of you boys and girls.

MAGNOLIA FOLCK
609 North 12th St.
Griffin, Ga.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1" — "2" — "3" — "4" — an' so on, in the order of your likin'.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
23 West 47th Street New York, N. Y.

L. P. HOLMES *Death Cracks the Overland Whip*	___
W. L. COVERT *Powdersmoke Extra*	___
ART KERCHEVAL *Hot-Lead Windup*	___
CHARLES IRWIN *Port Town on the Prod*	___
NAT W. McKELVEY *Hell's Rangers*	___
J. EDWARD LEITHEAD *Brand-Blotters' Rodeo*	___
MEL HOLT *Jingle of a Badman's Spurs*	___
JOE ARCHIBALD *Alecs in Loco Land*	___
	___
	___

Name .....

Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

Alecs in Loco Land

By Joe Archibald

These two fiddlefooted jaspers were slow on the trigger when it came to working for their dinero. But after the lazy galoots hit the town of Scratch Gravel, they had to do more than dig to keep themselves out of a boot hill plot.

BUTTERBALL EPPS and Gabby Snead, cowpunchers by trade, gents of leisure by preference, stopped their horses on their way across a flat bench to pity three waddies who were chasing strays out of a windbreak.

"Well, somebody has to work I s'pose," the skinny cowpoke observed. "The Lord put some banties in this vale of tears to work with their hands—others to use their brains. I had a headache this mornin', Butterball."

"Doesn't prove a thing," the corpulent rider sniffed.

They rode off the bench, crossed an arroyo, and urged their horses up a long slope where they came to a well-used road. There were weathered signposts nailed every which way to a tree.

"We can take our pick," Butterball said. "Steal Easy Creek, 6 miles. Shinbone Peak, 8 miles. Scratch Gravel, Sparerib, an' Toewash Flats. What'll it be."

"Close your eyes, Fatty, an' I'll spit at 'em. The sign that gits splashed the most, that is where we tarry."

Gabby Snead cut loose. Scratch Gravel

got the worst of the bargain, so the cowpokes headed that way.

"Looks like Texas to me," Butterball said. "Them longhorns everywhere. How much dinero we got?"

"About a hundred dollars each," Gabby said. "Enough to keep us respectable fer a while yet."

They arrived in Scratch Gravel at three P.M. It was a hodgepodge of frame buildings nestling in the crook of a muddy tributary of the upper Pecos. The main street was shaped like a dog's hind leg and the broncs sank up to their shinbones in gumbo.

"I wondered why that boat was in front of the saloon," Butterball sniffed. "When it rains here they start hollerin' for Noah, I bet."

There was a nice-looking buckboard standing in front of a notion store, the broncs hitched to it chewing contentedly on their bits. Gabby quickly yanked his bronc to a stop. "That vest in the winder, Butterball. It's sure gorgeous, huh? I wonder how much?"

"I had a nightmare oncet that didn't look half as bad, you ol' fool," the fat cowpoke snorted.

"I won't never rest until I git it," Gabby said. "I won't be but a minute."

Butterball Epps sighed with misgivings as he watched Gabby dismount and walk into the store. Three minutes later Gabby emerged, wearing the waistcoat that featured just about every color in the spectrum.

"Nell's bells!" Butterball gasped. "It looks worst out here than it did in there. Go take if off! Ugh, you look like—"

EVERYTHING seemed to happen at once. Just as a citizen with a swallow-tailed coat, a bristly mustache, and bluish nose started to climb into the buckboard, the horses let out a snort of sheer panic and took off like jackrabbits. They broke loose from the buckboard and headed for the hotel piazza. The wagon, on its own, went through a little alley with the blue-nosed man huddled between the seat and the dashboard. There was a long drawn-out yell and a splintering splash.

"Look what you did!" Butterball choked out. "That vest turned them broncs back into mustangs."

"Me? Look here, you overstuffed—"

A hand fell on Gabby Snead's shoulder. "Reckon you're under arrest."

Gabby twisted his head around. He saw an hombre no fatter than himself, but never remembered himself looking so mean in the eyes.

"Name's Saul Grimp, Scratch Gravel sheriff. That wagon that went in the creek had Bildad Honeyflower on it. Owner of the Half Wheel. You are charged with disturbin' the peace, assault, an' wreckin' property."

"I didn't do no such things," Gabby yelped. "I just come out wearin' a new vest an'—"

"Got a ordnance in this town, my friend. Says any dude that scares livestock within the town limits is li'ble. Had to make it the day a dude scairt a bunch of cattle passin' by here. Caused a stampede. Come along, Mister."

The sheriff, now supported by half a dozen of Scratch Gravel's taxpayers, shoved Gabby Snead along the walk toward a frame building over the door of which was a sign that proclaimed:

ELI KIP, ESQ. Judge.
Justice of the Peace.
County Solicitor. Assayer.
Real Estate & Wills Probed.

"Didn't he ever learn to undertake?" Butterball yelped.

Judge Kip looked the culprit over, picked up a gavel and sat down at his table. At that moment a bedraggled character barged into the office, cussing like a mule skinner with hives.

"Where is the coyote? Gimme a gun, somebody, as my powder's all wet. I'll fill that vest so full of holes—"

"Order!" Judge Kip roared. "Awright, I saw it all, Bildad, an' you don't hafta split a seam. What's your name?" he pushed toward Gabby Snead.

The tall cowpoke told him.

"How much was that new buckboard with the rubber tires?" Kip asked Bildad Honeyflower.

"Three hundred dollars, Your Honor.

Damages to my person an' dignity, a hundred dollars.

"Fair enough," the judge nasaled. "Pay up, Snead, or go to jail."

"Wha-a-a?"

Butterball's legs began wobbling.

"You heard the order of the court, Snead!"

"It's a holdup," Gabby gulped. "We only got two hundred between me an' my partner an' it's all the money we have in the world an'—"

"I'm short of help," Bildad yelped. "They kin work out the rest on the Half Wheel."

"Mighty kind of you, Bildad," the judge said. "Fork over the two hundred, gents."

"We go to jail," Butterball forced out.

"Suit yourselves," Kip grinned. "Dollar a day we take off fer every day served. Two hundred days—"

"We'll pay an' go to work," Gabby squeaked out. "Scratch Gravel, huh? I wisht I'd spit at some other bunch of signposts. Well, dig down, Butterball."

"All on account of a four-dollar vest," the fat cowpoke coughed out. "I ought to let you stew in your own—"

"Don't fergit, we are partners," Gabby sighed.

TWO hours later Gabby Snead and Butterball Epps rode out to the Half Wheel with Bildad and three of his hands.

"We're an enterprisin' outfit," Bildad said. "Git up every mornin' at five. Knock off around seven at night. Half hour at noon fer chuck."

Butterball seemed to evince great pain and Gabby had his six-gun out and was looking into the barrel. "I wisht I was brave enough to pull the trigger."

They passed a bunch of disreputable-looking buildings and became aware of a very unpleasant odor.

"Sheep!" the fat cowpoke groaned. "Don't tell me we got them wool shirts on the hoof around here?"

Bildad Honeyflower cussed. "Yep. Miguel Mescali owns two hundred of the critters. Miguel was once a torrydoor down in Mexico. Said he killed two hundred an' three bulls in combat."

"An' he raises sheep now," Gabby sniffed. "It is like findin' out Billy the Kid oncet owned a tame bird store."

"The flea-bitten, mangy tortilla fiend!" the owner of the Half Wheel howled. "I'll get Old Wall-eye yet!"

"Huh? The Mex was gored by a bull, huh?" Butterball asked.

"Wall-eye is a trout," Winky Cate, a Half Wheel puncher, disclosed. "Biggest ever seen in this part of the country. Lives in a deep pool an' never leaves it. I almost had him oncet, but Rosita shot the top of my left ear off. Want to look?"

"Rosita?" Gabby queried.

"Miguel's señorita," Bildad snorted. "When the Mexican is tendin' his bah-bahs, she sits on the roof of her house an' keeps a rifle trained on that pool. When she has to cook the grub, her son Cisco takes over. Night an' day they're on guard."

"Just fer a fish," Butterball scoffed.

"I don't sabe," Gabby muttered.

"Long story," Winky Cate said. "Has to do with Mex superstition an' the zodiac. Long as that big trout is in that stream back of Miguel's house he don't have to be scairt about the celestial bull gorin' him in his sleep."

"Are we in loco land?" the fat cowpoke gulped.

"Nope. That's no place for a couple of smart-alecs like you two," Bildad drawled. "A fish is called Pishkus on the zodiac. Taurus is the bull. As long as Pishkus is in the ascendance in Miguel Mescali's house, the bull can't bring him no harm. That's what he says."

"I've always caught the biggest trouts in this country," Bildad Honeyflower griped. "Got to have this one as there'll never be another as big."

"Had that old giant half outa the water," Winky said. "Looked right in its wall-eye. Then—"

Bildad sighed deeply. "Yep, the greaser got warned by a fortuneteller after he kilt one certain bull. He believes anythin'."

The little group of riders dipped down off a bluff and straggled through the gate of the Half Wheel. "This is awful, Gabby," Butterball gulped. "All them

buildin's need whitewash. Fences are fallin' down. St. Nick hisself couldn't of picked us a worst place."

Supper failed to lift their spirits. Rather it weighted them down with what the Half Wheel sheffie chose to call saleratus biscuits. The beef stew was filled with splintery bones and fat and Gabby even found a pants button in it. The butterscotch pudding was as creamy as glue and Butterball limped out of the dining room after dropping a slab of the sheffie's gingerbread on his toe.

"Let's ride tonight, li'l friend," Gabby said when he got Butterball out by the corral.

"We're only on parole, is all," the fat waddy said. "There'll be reward dodgers up everywhere an' we won't have no place to rest our weary heads an'—"

"Sh-h-h-h-h-h, somebody's comin'," Gabby warned.

IT WAS Winky Cate and a little bow-legged banty with a clump of whiskers tougher than mesquite.

"Hiya, gents," Winky said. "Meet Ananias Luce. Biggest liar in seven counties but kin almost make you believe him."

"I wisht you was tellin' a lie sayin' me and my partner was here," Butterball snapped.

"Ain't so bad, gents. Every Christmas Bildad gives us five dollars fer a bonus," Winky said.

Ananias, his old pipe gurgling, sat down on an old upturned water bucket.

"Tell 'em that story about the bull," Winky coaxed.

"The bovine ghost?" Ananias asked, needing no urging. "Maybe that Mex ain't as loco as folks think, friends. Remember a famous outlaw named Silver Spurs Slade?"

"Heard the name somewheres," Gabby mumbled. "A kind of friction character, huh? Like that English owlhoot Robbem Hood."

"No such thing," Ananias sniffed. "Was real, that coyote. Know how he died?"

"Rope burns?" Butterball asked.

"Nope. Was bein' chased by a sheriff's posse after robbin' a railroad train where he took a diamond tirara offen the governor's wife worth fifteen thousand dollars."

"No woman is worth that," Winky drawled.

"The tirara, you mush-head," Ananias said. "Well, the governor's wife was on her way to attend a function at Fort Stockton an'—anyway, they chased Silver Spurs Slade an' he come to a cliff an' then he see the phantom bull an' it scares his bronc and it jumps off with him. Nobody ever saw hide nor hair of him since. Ol' feller who was a member of the posse told me. He saw it all. Feller's dead now."

"Did I ever tell you of the four-headed rattler I saw oncet?" Butterball asked. "Wore a gun belt. One day—"

"They don't believe me, Winky," Ananias said sadly. "I want no truck with these rannies."

"I've heard awful lies in my time," Gabby scoffed. "But you sure know where to find the lulus, Ananias. Come on, Butterball, we got to get shut-eye. Tomorrow we—"

"Don't say it!" the fat cowpoke groaned. "You got any chewin', Winky?"

"Paupers," Ananias sniffed and walked away.

"Where was the cliff the owlhoot flew off of, Winky?"

"Back of Miguel's sheep ranch," the Half Wheel cowpoke said.

Butterball and Gabby were dragged out of their bunks at four-thirty, ate soggy biscuits and molasses and inky coffee for breakfast, then threw their saddles on their broncs and went out to work out the damage they had done to Bildad Honeyflower. All that day they labored, and when the sun was down, Gabby Snead fell off his horse and told Butterball to get the bottle of rubbing liniment out of his saddlebags.

"Every one of my bones is sprung, too," Butterball choked out. "I can't reach that far. I read that book about Uncle Tom oncet. I never knowed Simon Legree had a son."

"I'm dyin', Butterball."

The foreman of the Half Wheel yelled

at the reclining cowpokes. "Stir your stumps, blast your hides!" he said. "Got the corral to mend when we get back to the ranch."

"Shoot me," Gabby croaked. "I won't never walk ag'in anyways."

Butterball cried out with alarm and got up. "He's pulled his Colt, Gabby. Git up! He can't take no joke."

THE foreman's name was Whipsaw Buzzell. He was nearly seven feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds, and had a stubble on his chin that would easily grate the hardest cheese. According to veteran Half Wheel punchers he hadn't laughed since his wife fell into the Yuma River.

Gabby got up and staggered toward his bronc, pulled himself to the saddle with terrible effort. "Let's not go to bed at all, Whipsaw. Let's start another day right now. Yip-p-p-eee!"

"Delirious," Butterball gulped. "Don't never take him at his word after he's worked fourteen hours straight, Whipsaw."

"Only thirteen an' a half," the foreman growled. "Stop exaggeratin'."

That night, Bildad Honeyflower sent a cowpoke named Hunk Neely out to make a try for Old Wall-eye. It was a moonlit night and the Half Wheel owner figured there might be a chance to corral the mammoth trout. At nine P. M. Hunk walked flat-footed into the bunkhouse. "Them greasers can sure shoot," he said ruefully. "Got my pipe first shot. While I was runnin' they got both my boot heels."

Winky sighed. "Somebody'll get kilt yet if the boss keeps bein' so stubborn."

"Guess about everybody has tried," Whipsaw rasped out. "All exceptin' them two wart-heads over in the corner. H-m-m! Wonder why Bildad never thought of 'em."

"Don't you go remindin' him neither," Butterball gulped. "We're doin' our work an'—"

Gabby nudged Butterball. "Don't say nothin', you tub of lard."

The fat man drew a long deep breath. "There's things worst than death," he muttered. "We work out that bill fer damages for six months an' then where kin we go? We'll still be broke unlest we work another six months to git a stake."

"A year on this range of Tophet?" Gabby groaned. "No, Butterball, a thousand times no. Let's go fishin'."

"Sh-h-h-h!"

Three nights later, Butterball and Gabby rode into Scratch Gravel with a dollar they had borrowed from Winky Cate.

"Dang blast it," Gabby griped. "A horsefly couldn't git a edge on with fifty cents. Let's match to see who goes dry."

"I will not," Butterball snorted. "Look at the Mex over there. I thought I smelt sheep. Bones an' notches, señor," he called out.

Miguel Mescali tossed a sack of grain atop a bony bronc's back and eyed the cowpunchers askance.

"Ha, ha," Gabby said. "We heard ze story about ze bool, amigo. It is bull, huh? I never heard such lies, señor. You look like a intelligent hombre an' maybe we can make a deal. You want Bildad Honeyflower to buy ze feesh, maybeso?"

"Not for ze meelion pesos," the Latin yelled. "An' tall ze señor next time Miguel shoots to keel!"

"He believes it, Butterball!" Gabby choked out. "Let's go to the saloon."

After one drink apiece, Butterball and Gabby left the oasis and walked to the edge of town where they sat down on a rail of a corduroy bridge.

"We got to git out of this land of perdition, Gabby," the fat cowpoke sighed and fingered a sulphur match.

"Let's pilgrim now, Butterball."

"Shut up, Gabby. I'm thinkin'."

"That don't help none."

"Let's ride back to the Half Wheel," Butterball said after a long silence. "I am goin' to make a deal with Bildad."

"You'll go after that danged wall-eye trout all alone," Gabby sniffed.

"You must be a mind reader," the fat banty grinned. "Anyway, that's the general idea."

BILDAD was getting ready to go to bed when Butterball knocked on the door of the ranch house. The boss of the Half Wheel opened the door and started cussing when he saw the visitors.

"Of all the gall! If this ain't an aitch of a time at night to call on a man. Git back to the bunkhouse 'fore I—"

"Want to talk about that big fish, Boss," the roly-poly ranny said. "We—"

Bildad's mouth popped open. He grinned. "Come in, boys," he said.

"We'll go to Potter's field wherever it is," Gabby moaned.

"It's a deal," Bildad said. "We can put it in writin' an' git it witnessed proper. We'll draw up the papers in Scratch Gravel tomorrer afternoon, boys. Now vamoose."

At three o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, Butterball and Gabby signed their John Hancocks on an agreement between the party of the first part and the parties of the second. The sher-

They went in and sat down. Butterball cleared his throat. "Er, what's in it fer us, Bildad, if we catch that trout, huh?"

"It'll clear that debt, Fatty, every ding-danged dollar of it," the cattleman said. "Want to make a try, Epps?"

"Figured maybe you'd give us a li'l more," Butterball said.

"Look, I can step that debt up to three hundred," the Half Wheel proprietor yelped. "Awright, them's my terms. Take 'em or leave 'em."

"We leave 'em," Gabby choked out.

"He means we take 'em," Butterball said. "Tell us where we git the fishin' poles."

"You got relatives?" Bildad asked solicitously. "It'll be a expense to bury you hombres. Business ain't been so good this year an'—"

iff witnessed the transaction. They also signed a statement to the effect that Bildad would not be responsible for obituaries in the event that Miguel Mescali and family chose to aim for vital parts of their anatomies.

"Good luck, gents," Bildad said, and shook their hands. "You have two days off."

"Huh?" Gabby coughed out. "Then I don't mind facin' death.

Before Butterball Epps left town he purchased a big sack of biscuit flour and twenty boxes of matches and charged them to the Half Wheel. Riding out of Scratch Gravel and not toward the ranch, Gabby Snead waxed morbid.

"I always wanted a stone headpiece, Butterball. One with a li'l angel or a lamb on it."

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"Shut up about lambs," the chunky cowpoke snapped. "What we got to do is pull the wool over that greaser's eyes."

"Where we goin' to start?" Gabby asked.

"First we got to rope that big bull of Bildad's out in the southwest pasture," Butterball said. "I'll make a lie come true if it kills me."

"What?"

"Then maybe we go fishin'," Butterball growled. "It is worth any risk to git out of that ol' rip's clutches. We can start anew an'—"

"If the bull don't kill us both. If the Mex don't shoot us!" Gabby groused.

"Tonight we are torrydoors, Gabby."

"Ain't that wonderful, you ball of suet! I'll try an' sing like that gal, Carmen," Gabby scoffed.

THE cowpokes rode to Bildad's property in the lee of a beetling butte, advanced cautiously toward a little box canyon where a Half Wheel Brahma bull was wont to hive up during the wee small hours.

"Keep your rope ready," Butterball whispered hoarsely. "The cuss will be half asleep an' should be easy to corral."

"I heard it move," Gabby hissed out. "There, you kin see its big horns in the moonlight, over by them scrub oaks. Let's go!"

A rope made a singing, swishing sound as it spun away from Gabby's practiced hand. Butterball let his loop float expertly through the gloom as the bull got to its feet and let out a sleepy grunt. Butterball and Gabby knew their trade even though they hated working at it. Three minutes later the Brahma was well *hors de combat*.

"Now," Butterball said. "Let's git them matches an' git the tips off 'em. About midnight when the ghosts walk we ought to see some fun."

"A celestial bull, huh?" Gabby sniffed.

"Yep. Let's make an honest man outa Ananias," the fat cowpoke grinned. "Lookit how the sulphur shines on my fingers, Gabby."

"We'll drive the bull over that cowpath that strings past Miguel's, Butter-

ball. It'll foller it by instink. We'll be behind it an' bouncin rocks offen its rump if it gits stubborn. You got biscuit flour enough?"

Twenty minutes before midnight, Miguel Mescali and his wife Rosita were on the flat roof of their old 'dobe and slab house looking down at the deep pool of the creek where Old Wall-eye lived.

"Ah, my leetle one," the Mex said sleepily. "I don't theenk the gringos try for ze feesh no more, *si*. Not for a while, Rosita. You hear sometheeng, no?"

"I theenk I hear a sound like ze bool, Miguel," the señor said, and shivered.

"You have ze jomps, Rosita. Ze jeeters." the sheepherder laughed. "Let us go an' mak' ze sleep an'—*Madre de Dios!* Look on ze heel! Ze bool! Ze horns zey shine—ze bool all white like ze phantasma! Eet looks right at me, R-Roseeta. Pronto, we mus' go! Leesten to ze bool roar. *Caramba! Valgame Dios!* Wake up Ceesco, queek! *Madre de Dios!* I get ze *caballo!* You get ze seelver candlesteeks, my matador suit. *Valgame*—! I theenk the gringos get zat feesh while we have ze siesta!"

"Lookit the flour smoke out from that Brahma when it jumps, Butterball?" Gabby said hoarsely. "It even scares the chaps offen me. Hit it with a rock ag'in an' it'll stampede right down there an'—"

Butterball, crouching behind a big boulder on the top of the rise, could look down into the Mex's yard. He saw the whole Mescali family climb atop the bony bronc and immediately proceed to evacuate the sheep spread.

"An awful load fer that *caballo*," Butterball marveled. "But lookit the way it is travelin'. Ought to be in Mexico City by sunup. When that happens we go fishin'. Where is ze bool?"

"Down there by Miguel's hogpen," Gabby said between spasms of mirth. "Look at them horns shine."

"Better cut us a good long willer pole, Gabby. I got fishin' line, a sinker, an' a hook. We'll try bugs an' worms fer bait an' if the trout don't like 'em, we'll use some of your red flannel shirt. Wisht Ananias was here. He'd make this a worst lie than we did."

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A MILE away, Miguel Mescali kept trying to spur more speed out of the over-burdened bone-rack. "Ceesco! I bet you fall asleep in ze afternoon while I am in ze town an' your mama is makeeng ze *tortillas, si?* Zey catch ze feesh! Ze bool weel get your papa eef eet takes heem—!"

The sun of the new day shone brilliantly. Butterball Epps and Gabby Snead stood on the bank and looked into the deep pool where Old Wall-eye browsed. The fat waddy rigged up his pole and impaled a grasshopper on the hook.

"Ought to like that chuck," he said, and made an apology for a cast. Gabby stretched out on the wild lettuce and waited. "Come on, ol-timer, bite. It means you free two slaves, yep. Two hundred dollars is what we owe Bildad an' so be a good fish, huh?"

"Shut up!" Butterball sniffed.

An hour passed and Butterball Epps might just as well have been dangling bait in the horse watering trough in Scratch Gravel. The fat cowpoke switched to worms and had no better luck. "They are all liars, Gabby," Butterball groaned. "I wisht that cussed trout'd hurry up as that Mex might smell a rat."

"Cut a chunk of red flannel off your sleeve," Butterball finally ordered.

"It's my last shirt, dang you! We're broke an' where'll I git another?"

"One more li'l piece of argument out of you, Gabby, an' I'll stab you an' take the whole shirt!"

A half-hour later, Butterball yipped, "Got somethin', Gabby! Weighs as much as a wagon wheel. It is that trout awright! Look at the pole bend. Gimme room here while I land the cuss. We'll be free, Gabby. We'll—now!"

The catch came above the surface. Butterball groaned and nearly let go of the pole. On the end of the line was a high-heeled boot and the sun glinted against a spur that was still attached to it.

"Haw-w-w!" Gabby laughed. "If we used a different kind of bait, we'd of caught a vest maybe. Ha!"

"I'll shoot you in a minute, you—!" Butterball's outburst broke off suddenly

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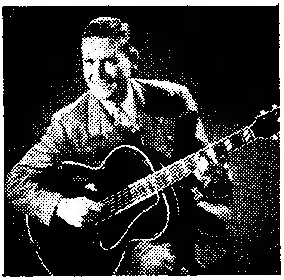

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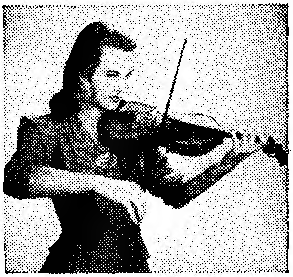

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